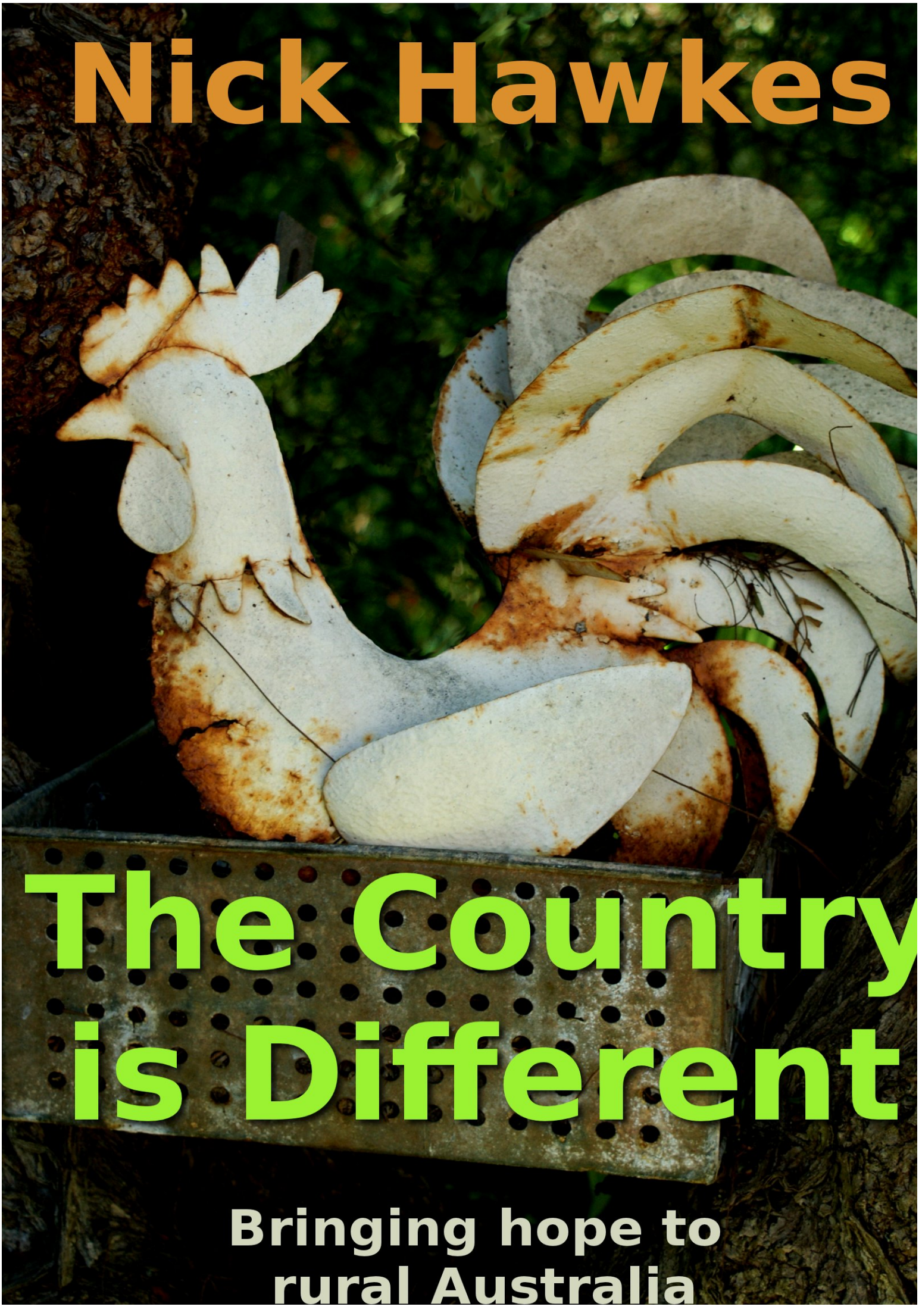
Nick Hawkes
The Country is Different
Bringing hope to rural Australia

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1995 (revised, 2008)

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FOREWORD
By Sir Alan Walker

This is an important book. It is written by a country minister who knows and loves his people, and it will offer valuable guidance.

The book provides insights into the sociology of country people and provides vital information on the changing face of farming, rural health and education.

This book also highlights the church's role in seeking justice for country people. It calls the church to be a voice for rural people in their search for a future against a background of indifference and neglect by city-based institutions.

The final chapter is particularly valuable in that it points to the future shape of the church in country Australia, a country where God abides and where the changeless gospel brings hope.

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The Joint Board of Christian Education says of this book:

Based on the author's experience both as an agricultural scientist and Christian minister, this book provides an excellent summary of what is happening in rural Australia, especially in terms of education, health and employment. It offers informed insight into the problems experienced by the farming community in times of economic uncertainty and social change.

Above all, however, it offers hope for rural communities, for it shows how rural ministry can be relevant, effective and faithful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Jeanette Wormald for permission to use her songs in this book. These songs are taken from her first recording *Mallee Bride* and her second recording *To the Mallee Born* (Ochre Records) which are available from: P.O. Box 691, Loxton, South Australia, 5333.

I am also grateful to David Schulz for permission to use his two poems *Baa Baa Merino Sheep* and *Sing a Song a Sixpence* which are taken from his book "The Farmer—He's a Real Dag", available from: Box 140, Tailem Bend, South Australia, 5260.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about country Australia. It explores how country towns work and investigates farming practices, rural health and education. Above all, it is a thesis about the country church and its role in leading rural communities to rediscover their hope for the future.

Churches in Australian country towns are under pressure. There is a general drift of people away from rural communities into the cities so their population base is dwindling. Australia has also become a secular society. Church going is not a high priority for many people. Despite this, we see evidence of a considerable church infrastructure remaining in our small towns. There are large church buildings representing as many as five different denominations. There are perhaps three resident ministers each with a house, car and superannuation. The capital required to maintain such an infrastructure is huge. The question that we need to ask is whether this is the most efficient use of the "widow's mite" so faithfully given?

Most churches are less than half full on Sunday and are typically open for only one or two hours a week. Ministers rush between churches, too exhausted by the demands of travelling to offer much more than a general ministry that maintains the status quo.

Surely there is a more efficient means of sustaining a rural ministry than to shore up the infrastructure of the past. These structures have served the period of history they were designed for well, but now things have changed. Times have moved on and although the gospel does not change, the methods by which we present it must.

If we begin with the premise that the Spirit of God is as active in rural Australia as in the cities, we need to ask what it is that the Spirit is doing in the country—then join in with what God is seeking to do.

Two factors are evident about God's work amongst us.

The first is that the Spirit of God is essentially creative and creating. God is never one for sitting on His hands and looking backwards to the "good old days."

> *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.*
> *See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?* (Isaiah 43:18-19, NIV)

Dinosaurs were not able to adapt, and died. No one wants the same fate to befall the rural church. Fortunately, that fate cannot befall the rural church if we are seeking to be faithful to a creative God. To walk with the Spirit is to continually risk change, not death. The issue of how to make the church relevant in rural areas is therefore not one of progressive radicals verses conservative traditionalists. It is one of how can we be faithful and so share in God's mission to the world.

The second is that God chooses to sit with us, identify with us and work with us. We have the greatest illustration of that in the life of Christ. One of the implications of this for us is that we, like Christ, need to know where the people are so we can begin to minister there with them, rather than impose upon them ill-fitting historical anachronisms or the latest trendy idea.

Unfortunately, reform always has its attendant discomfort. We need to become uncomfortable before we will embrace change. It is not easy to live in this "discomfort zone" but that is where many of our rural ministers are now living. They are experiencing the pain of old systems that don't work. Many are "burning out" under the demands of ministry, particularly in areas of rural economic downturn. It is to be hoped that this pain is the pain that heralds the birth of something new. In saying this, however, we must also acknowledge the attendant pain and grief that comes with change, i.e. the loss of the old and familiar. However, it is this pain of letting go that allows the birth of the new.

This small book seeks to investigate the Australian rural environment so that we are better able to craft an appropriate ministry there. The earlier chapters contain a lot of facts that make sobering reading. This can't be avoided. The country is different and unless we learn the characteristics of a hurting rural Australia, we will not be able to begin where people are. The final chapter seeks to distil a theology that allows us to discover a hope and direction for the future of the rural Australian church.

Questions for individual reflection or group discussion are given at the end of each chapter, making the book ideal for those being trained for ministry in rural areas.

WE DON'T TALK ANY MORE

A song by Jeanette Wormald

We don't talk any more, but I know something's wrong.
We don't talk any more, Honey, you don't have to be strong.

From dawn until dusk you are working
and at night you are too tired to chat.
No matter my style of persuasion,
I have better conversation with the cat.

We don't talk any more, but I know something's wrong.
We don't talk any more, Honey you don't have to be strong.

I know that these times are not easy
when the prices and crops aren't that good.
But I promised "for richer, for poorer"
and I'd help you if only you would let me.

We don't talk any more, but I know something's wrong.
We don't talk any more. Where has my husband gone?

Just let me know what you're thinking.
I'm your wife and farm's partner too.
We can work through these hard times together.
Darling, can I be your friend too?

We don't talk any more... and I miss you.

© Jeanette Wormald, Nov.1994

Chapter 1
UNDERSTANDING THE RURAL CHURCH

The need for the rural church to search for a new direction is particularly understood when the history of the church's function in rural areas is appreciated. Until the 1960's, the church was an important centre for socialising, social welfare, (usually run on a fairly informal level), agricultural advice and sport. The church was also active in education, both at school and (particularly for Methodists) Sunday school. Today, government agencies have taken over many of these functions whilst sport and social events are largely run by groups of community minded volunteers.[1] This means that the rural church has needed to establish its relevance to the rural community in new ways. What ways has it sought to do this?

The rural church has continued to provide a service in celebrating the rites of passage (baptisms, weddings and funerals). Dwindling rural populations have meant that few civil marriage celebrants set up in small country towns. Most rural marriages are still conducted in a church. Many country people still nurse a vague affinity with the church because they are within two generations of a family church-going tradition.

The church has also been one of the things that have helped define the identity of the local community and so there is still a sense of ownership by the community of the church. It is not unusual for local people to help repair a church they don't even attend. The church is part of their story. Their grandfather may have helped build it. The church is theirs, the one they "stay away from," except for their wedding and funeral.

The rural church continues to play an important role in the giving of pastoral care. The high profile of the rural Minister means that he or she still retains the important function of being the town's social

worker, psychiatrist and marriage guidance counsellor. These roles are woven into the fabric of rural communities.

In a quick moving world of change and shallow relationships, the church has been well placed to provide intimacy and in-depth caring relationships. The gospel (and therefore mission of the church) is essentially relational. Whilst it can't hope to compete with high tech videos and "virtual reality", it can give what people crave most—a reason to face reality with hope. Morale can sometimes be low in rural areas, particularly in those which are depopulating and from which services are being withdrawn. It is a frightening fact that one of the highest suicide rates in the world occurs amongst young rural Australian men.[2] In these areas, the church can be a particularly important agent of hope. It provides the gift of love and the gift of time in an otherwise harsh environment.

A practical demonstration of this was given in 1988 when funding was made available to send four ministers to the drought stricken areas of Eyre Peninsular to help with the pastoral care workload there. The local farmers had been in drought since 1985 and were at their wits end. One of these ministers was John Richardson, an ex farmer. He was able to bring along his sheep dog "Blackie" which helped farmers to accept and relate to him.

The rural church has had an important prophetic role. Its voice has been sought to educate and arouse the conscience of the community on matters such as our responsibility for the poor and marginalised. The church has been a community watchdog precisely because it has been a spiritual watchdog. In an age where "rubbery" ethics seem to be so much in vogue and in which those in positions of wealth and privilege protect the very structures that keep them in power, often to the detriment of the poor, the church has needed to speak out. It must continue to do so and question why it is that the rich get richer and the poor poorer. The relatively high visibility of the church and clergy in rural areas positions them well to speak out in local newspapers and on radio.

The country church also has an advocacy role. The values held by most rural people mean that they don't expect the same level of facilities as urban people. However, needs and injustices still occur. This has required the church to be an advocate for rural people, as many of them are not been skilled at asking for help or articulating their needs.

An example of this occurred after the 1993 Federal election campaign during which the Federal Minister for the Environment sought to woo the votes of environmentalists by stating her intention to nominate the Lake Eyre Basin for world heritage listing. The area involved was huge. It consisted of forty percent of South Australia, thirty percent of Queensland, twenty percent of the Northern Territory and five percent of New South Wales. The inland farming community were in shock. There had been no consultation. Suddenly, farmers and the banks did not know whether properties in the Eyre basin had any value. The Frontier Services Padre, Malcolm Thomas, signalled to the Uniting Church South Australian Synod that he needed help, so the church convened a meeting between representatives of the South Australian Farmers Federation and officers of The Department of Environment and Land Management. As a result of this meeting, (held at Spalding in September 1993), Malcolm was able to FAX the farmers in his patrol area with findings that helped greatly to allay their fears.

At a more local level, the council at Keith in South Australia's South East sought to give a nearby quarry area to the National Parks and Wildlife in 1993 because they didn't want to be liable should an accident occur there. Unfortunately, this meant sacrificing a main recreation area for local youth. Happily, the publicity and petition organised by the local church caused the decision to be reversed.

DYNAMICS OF THE SMALL RURAL CHURCH

The rural church is quite often a small church with less than 40 people attending each Sunday. The dynamics of a small church are well documented[3] and it is important to be aware of them, as they have been the very things that have battered the idealism of many a newly ordained minister. What then, are they?

Small churches are typically resilient and will resist closure even when numbers are very low. This is because the church building is considered sacred, although not necessarily in the conventional sense. Small churches are jealously guarded as much for their significance in defining people's identity and history, as for being places of worship.

The intimate nature of small churches makes them very personal. Blood ties and family church-going traditions are important. The focus of the small church is on caring for specific people within the church. Individuals are important. Indeed, it is not unusual for a course of action to be shelved because of objections from just one person. Small country churches are often insular in their ministry and seek to attract people to church rather than take the gospel from church out into the community.

Small churches are largely run by lay volunteers, with key individuals doing tasks that would normally be done by committees in larger churches. The decision to repair the church gutters is likely to be made informally over a cup of tea after general discussion following a church service.

There are not usually enough people in a small church to justify the running of services for specialist groups (e.g. for youth or young families). As a result, church services are intergenerational, (although women over the age of sixty five will usually be over-represented). Such churches therefore prefer ministers who can provide a sound "generalist" ministry.

Small churches are typically presided over by one or two key families. There is usually a patriarch or matriarch who formally or informally determines much of what happens in the fellowship. (The minister can be cast in the role of a visiting family chaplain). Good communication, gentle education and love are often required to forestall battles for control.

The fact that one or two people can determine the style and social norms of a small church can mean that there is strong pressure on people attending that church to conform. The young, the previously unchurched and the working class often have difficulty with this and so keep away. (Barriers to the gospel are often as much sociological as theological.) This can make small churches difficult to grow.

Small groups can play a key role in addressing this dilemma. When Tintinara Uniting Church was faced with this problem in 1993, the minister and elders began monthly evening meetings in the shearers' quarters of a lovely old stone shearing shed. There they cooked damper, sang, laughed and talked together. The hope was that this would not only be a time of fun and discipleship, but would also give potential for another congregation to develop that was not shackled to the existing church. On the basis that new people join new groups, this group was seen as offering another door through which people might enter Christ's church.

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

These then are some of the features of small rural churches and some of the functions they perform. However, not all is going well. Ministry structures that have served the church so well in the past, now, all too often, hang heavy around the necks of those seeking to remodel their ministry to cope with the changes that have taken place in the country. Questions need to be asked about how our

congregations can best craft an appropriate and effective ministry in their communities.

If we are to begin to find an answer to this, we must first examine what is happening in rural Australia. The next few chapters will investigate the sociology of country towns and examine what is happening on the farm. They will also look at education and rural health. Once we have this background, we will be better placed to uncover some of the possibilities for future ministry.

A Rural Reflection

RED-GUM POSTS

The old red-gum posts looked dreadful. They had once held up road signs beside our country roads but now termites, rot and trigger-happy shooters had ruined them. They were to be burnt. Fortunately, I managed to get some of these posts. I planed them down to make them into bedposts. Underneath the paint, and away from the rot, the wood looked terrific. Occasionally, I'd come across a bullet when I turned the posts on the lathe. I've left these bullets in place to give added character.

That's what God does with us. Many of us feel a bit rotted and run down. Many of us feel “shot at” and think we're only good enough for the fire.

But God accepts us as we are, rotted and broken. He sees what's underneath and turns us into useful, beautiful people. The old scars and bullets he uses to give added character.

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QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1) What has particularly impacted you from reading this chapter?
2) What questions arise from reading the chapter?
3) What are the pros and cons of being a small church?
4) In what ways can the rural church be an advocate for its community?
5) How can the church capitalize on the dense social relationships that occur in country towns?
6) In what ways can a church community be a blessing to a town?
7) How can a rural church community best make self-sustaining disciples who are able to disciple others?

Chapter 2
UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural communities often pride themselves in being friendly. When moving to a country town, a minister or a doctor is introduced to key people, people who are established identities in the district. For these locals, being part of local society has worked. Their relationship with the community, which has given them their identity and status, has largely been a happy one.

However, a minister or doctor does not have to stay long in a country town to discover that social classes do exist and that the barriers between them can be very hard to break down.[1]

The poor, those of an ethnic minority group, the single mother and those who are unemployed can be subject to particular scorn. In fact, anyone who doesn't conform to the community's "normal" pattern of behaviour can expect to have a difficult time fitting in.

One of the results of a population move away from the country is that a number of farmhouses are available for cheap rent. It has been the experience of some rural communities, particularly those within reach of large urban centres, that these houses are now being occupied by people on social security who have moved to the area. Such people are often resented by the locals as they do not seen them contributing much to their community.

Ken Dempsey spent many years analysing the sociology of a small rural town in Western Victoria. It was his work that was unable to support the theory traditionally put forward by sociologists who suggested that supportive and caring behaviour was characteristic of small rural localities and self-seeking impersonal behaviour characteristic of urban centres. Dempsey exploded this myth when he uncovered the social ostracism by country people of "no-hopers", immigrant professionals, women who failed to conform to

local notions of respectability and policemen who are not sufficiently compliant.[2]

He discovered that for a move to a small rural town to be successful:

> *...the newcomer must be willing to meet the community more than half way and must be in possession of some key resources: good health, a satisfactory income and a partner. It also helps to have been engaged previously in an upper middle-class occupation.*[3]

Why is it that people in country towns seem less tolerant of people who don't comply to the norm? There is no easy answer. Certainly, it is the nature of humans to be suspicious of people who are not like them. Our rural towns can scarcely be described as cosmopolitan and the lack of exposure to different cultures and social settings does not encourage a climate of understanding and tolerance.

This predisposition is powerfully illustrated by a story told by Michael Schluter and David Lee in their book on *Relationism*. It is the story of a government archaeologist who came to Java and discovered an interesting stone. When he asked the local villagers about the stone he was told that it had been carved by a large white monkey who had been washed up on the shore many years ago. The locals had agreed that the monkey had been expelled from the court of the sea-god and so the chief of the village had it chained to a stone as an object of curiosity. When the archaeologist examined the stone, he found that the name of a European sailor had been carved into it in English, Dutch and Spanish, together with a detailed account of his shipwreck.

Different people are viewed with suspicion. This can sometimes be heightened when a "them and us" dynamic occurs, such as in a town which has both a European and an Aboriginal population. Church consultants will tell you that no fight is so vicious within a church as a fight between two camps, whether it is between

newcomers and established locals, or between progressives and traditionalists. Similar dynamics occur in rural towns.

However, to simply accuse rural people of being intolerant, ignorant rednecks is simplistic for there is another important factor at work.

Let me explain this by telling you a story told by a Fijian professor.[4] He described an incident where a visiting Samoan student was accidentally blinded in one eye. What was remarkable about this incident was that the Fijian government did not apologise to the student but did give a formal apology to the people of Samoa. The professor explained this by saying that any material, physical and academic gifts an island person may have are not considered to be the possession of the individual, but of their community. In other words, these island people have learned to rely on each other and to pool their resources in order to ensure their survival.

Australian rural communities can be likened to these islands. In order to thrive, its people have learned to share together in community work. Every town has a myriad of volunteer organisations that enable the local people to enjoy facilities that they wouldn't otherwise have.

If, therefore, a family on social security moves into town that don't share in these country ways, they can be seen as takers rather than givers. They are seen as people who are a burden, even a threat, to the community and are therefore treated with disdain.

Sally Johnson, Domestic Violence Outreach Worker with Upper Murray Family Care, highlights another aspect of rural thinking. When speaking of the nature of rural community support, (particularly in relation to domestic violence which seems to be more of a problem in difficult financial times), she says:

I know there's a lot of violence out there in rural areas but we hang on to this myth of the supportive rural community. It's a superficial support. When it comes to what's happening in people's personal lives, it's not there. In a bush fire—something outside the personal—there's full-on support. But if something disastrous like domestic violence happens inside the family, the support isn't there. It may be the subject of gossip.

The lack of support has a lot to do with a conservative value that you don't interfere with other people's lives. "Leave it to them; they'll sort it out." They don't necessarily see domestic violence as a crime.[5]

One of the features of country towns is that everyone is highly visible. It is difficult to be anonymous. People see you and notice you in a way that doesn't happen in a city. This has the advantage of encouraging the sort of mutual dependency that is a feature of rural living. This is reflected in the number of voluntary organisations that exist in rural towns. They are seen as the means by which recreational facilities and services can be obtained which would otherwise not be available.[6]

Organisations such as the State Emergency Service, Country Fire Service and the service clubs also provide a social function not unlike that of the gentlemens' clubs of Bertie Wooster's London. They are places men can go to socialise and have an identity. Its members have the added benefit of being associated with something altruistic that gives them purpose and significance.

The dense network of reciprocal relationships can, however, have a downside. It can serve to heighten the sense of alienation of those who fail to win acceptance.[7] It is not just the social misfits that suffer from this. The youth of the town can also feel conspicuous with this high visibility, particularly during adolescence.[8]

City people sometimes see country people as being somewhat brutalised by the realities of life and death that exist in the country. Vermin are shot and stock is butchered for home consumption or dog meat. The relatively harsh physical lifestyle may help explain why physical attributes are lauded, e.g. in sport. It may also help explain why those who are considered soft or lazy ("wimps" or "bludgers") are scorned.

A relevance of this for ministry is that should a church function cater for the unemployed or other marginalised group, it may not attract many ordinary townsfolk. This was certainly the experience of Keith Uniting Church when it ran a Friday night drop-in centre in 1992-1995. Some of the town's youth were not inclined to attend because the centre had become popular amongst unemployed youth and young mums in de facto relationships.

RURAL CULTURE, MYTH AND THEOLOGY

It is difficult to know how much credence to give to the existence of a rural folk culture. Rural stereotypes can be more myth than reality. Yet, there is often some basis in truth. The Australian archetype probably no longer exists in our multicultural urban centres. However, flavours of it possibly do linger on in the bush. Where did this stereotype come from? The Australian rural researcher Noel Park explains:

> *Australia's setters brought with them such characteristics as independence, toughness. Anti-authoritarian attitudes and collective morality from their Irish, convict, dissenter or working class background. At the same time, the huge distance from their homeland added a sense of isolation and together these factors created a need for national heroes in the new country. These heroes were generally of a tough, irreverent, rascal type with little respect for such things as religion or status*.[9]

The relevance of the rural Australian stereotype (if true) to church and ministry becomes apparent when three characteristics are identified as being legacies of our early European Australian history. These are that Australians (particularly those in the bush) are generally: 1) anti authoritarian; 2) anti moralistic, although a sense of fairness ("a fair go") may exist; and 3) anti institutional. As the church is seen by many in rural areas as embodying all three, it is perhaps not surprising that Christianity can struggle in the bush.

Noel Park believes that rural Australians may have a particular flavour of theology to their urban cousins. He suggests that rural people are more conservative and legalistic in their theology, giving greater priority to doing "good works" than urban people who focus more on an intimate relationship with God made possible by Christ Jesus.[10] However, this may simply be a reflection of the wider prevalence of working class values that exists in the bush and a greater reluctance to share things at a feelings level—certainly with words.

GOTTA BEAT THE BLOKE NEXT DOOR

A song, by Jeanette Wormald

If you want to be a success story
As a broad-acre farmer in the Murray-Mallee,
There's just one rule to follow:
You've gotta beat the bloke next door.

Chorus: Oh, you gotta beat the neighbour—run the best sheep;
You gotta beat the neighbour—grow the best crop;
You gotta beat the neighbour—be first to have it sown.
Oh, you gotta beat the bloke next door.

Well the rain gauge is working and it showing 30 points,

So you jump on the tractor to work back the joint.
You gotta work both days and nights if...
You want to beat the bloke next door.

Chorus:

Well it doesn't matter that you're as grumpy as hell,
Or that you've got a virus and ain't feeling well.
You know you'd feel much worse if...
You were beaten by the bloke next door.

Chorus:

Well, the work is almost over. Victory is near.
Though its meant you haven't spoken for a week to the Old Dear.
But a check over the boundary shows a crop sprouting green...
You've been beaten by the bloody bloke next door!
Chorus:

© Jeanette Wormald, May, 1993

IS THE COUNTRY REALLY CONSERVATIVE?

It is commonly held that country people are more conservative than their urban counterparts. An attitudinal study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that there was some basis of truth in this. Attitudes towards premarital sex and gender roles were found to be slightly more conservative.[11]

The reasons for this are unclear. It may be due to isolation. Country people may have less outside influence and experience of those things that bring about social change.[12] Some wonder whether it is a reflection of occupational status and level of education rather than rural isolation.[13]

Rural communities certainly seem to be more conservative in their theology. The debate as to whether the church should sanction homosexual leaders in the South Australian Synod of the Uniting Church (1990-1991) drew a particularly sharp response from rural presbyteries. Similarly, parish profiles given to prospective rural ministers indicate that liberal theology is not widely embraced in the country. Rural communities also have enculturated expectations of the functional roles of both sexes. These can be hard to break down. It can still be hard for women to win civic leadership responsibilities. The role traditionally expected of them is to provide the catering for the town's social and civic events.

Sexism can spill over into the church too. The decision makers in rural churches have traditionally been males over the age of fifty and some rural parishes still express a preference for their ministers to be male. Clergy can also have difficulty persuading men to go to fellowship groups led by women.

Rural sexual stereotyping is reinforced by the realities of inheritance. Farms are usually passed down to sons. In times of economic stringency, a farm may only be able to support one son. This means that daughters and non-inheriting sons must either go to the city to gain middle-class employment, or be content with more humble local jobs. The resultant migration of many young women to urban centres can skew the gender balance to such an extent that some young men find it difficult to find a mate.

Those that do find a mate can find themselves caught in an emotional tug-of-war. It is not unusual for a forty-year-old son to work a farm with his father who still controls the farm finances. This can bring considerable pressure, as the son feels both loyalty to his father and also to his wife who often resents the financial hold her father-in-law has over her husband.

DWINDLING SERVICES AND THE CULTURAL CRINGE

For some years, there has been a population drift to the cities from the country. The loss of services and business opportunities in country towns has meant that the diversity of skills once available to a community has diminished. Unfortunately, the concentration of job opportunities and services to urban areas can start a spiral of decline, vis: people leave because services are withdrawn; because people leave, further services are withdrawn. Cities can act much like a black hole to surrounding rural areas. They suck in all the facilities and give nothing out. A typical, if inconsequential, indicator of this is an advertisement in a state newspaper which reads:

> *We'll fly one lucky couple to exotic 'Lion City' ...just clip out the coupon, ...fill in your name, ...and drop it in a competition box at any* (Company name) *theatre*.[14]

Needless to say, such theatres don't occur in rural towns.

The overwhelming influence of the city can exacerbate the feeling rural people have of being away from the action, away from the centre of decision making, and away from promotional opportunities or recognition by their peers. Ministers being sent to the country frequently feel they need to defend their move to friends who's reaction is often: "We thought you had too much quality to be sent to the country. Never mind, your next placement will probably be back in the city." This does nothing to promote long-term mission in rural areas that is both valued and intentional.

Some city and country parishes have sought to overcome the lack of understanding of each other's environment by twinning together and running creative weekend exchange programmes. The shared activities of one successful weekend included: worship, a barn dance, tours of the local area and a workshop discussion.[15] The difficulty with twinning is that it can so easily degenerate into just being a good annual day out in the country for city people. It can

foster the illusion that their "tut tutting" about dwindling services before going on a hay ride actually accomplishes much.

Whilst on the subject of self-disclosure, many church ministers have learnt that the right environment is important if they are to touch base with farmers. The level of intimacy and self-disclosure will generally increase as they move from the church building to the farmhouse, ...and even more if they go outside with the farmer and lean on the "ute."

TO BE KNOWN DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN BEING UNDERSTOOD

It is often suggested that rural people know each other well and that they have a sense of community. However, whilst country people may know each other, it is probably a myth that country people know each other well. They may know each other's place of residence, employment, work ethic and generosity but they may know very little of each other's deeper hopes, hurts, fears, beliefs and dreams. Rural people can be very private people. There is even a feeling that too many people know each other's business in the country and this can lead to a reluctance to share. In a situation where a farmer might benefit from knowing that his neighbour is under pressure from a bank to sell, there also needs to be wisdom in choosing what can be shared, particularly amongst those who attend any of the small groups organised by the church.

There is a perception that rural people, particularly males, may not be as in touch with their feelings (or have the ability to communicate them) as their urban cousins. Rural parents who send their children to city boarding schools have learned that private city schools generally find country children less prepared academically and less skilled at expressing their thoughts and feelings in public.[16] This may or may not be true. If it is, it may be the product of isolation or a lack of self confidence due to a limited exposure to a

variety of social settings. It may also be the behaviour modelled by parents. Ruth Gasson, an English rural research worker writes:

> *Pilot studies suggest that farmers have a predominantly intrinsic orientation to work, valuing the way of life, independence and performance of work tasks above expressive, instrumental or social aspects of their occupation.*[17]

Whatever the reason, it serves to highlight the need for church fellowships to be places where people feel safe enough to express their feelings—or not to express them.

Communication and in depth sharing is not just a problem between rural families but also occurs within families. Research undertaken by the University of Sydney in 1992 discovered that in the important area of transferring the family farm to the next generation, 42% of farmers with married children at home on the farm had not talked to their spouse about plans for the eventual transfer, 63% had not spoken to their children about it and 84% had not included their daughter-in-law in discussions on the subject.[18]

RURAL CRISIS

Financial hardship on the farm can lead to feelings of shame, emotional and physical exhaustion, and a wish to withdraw from other people. In fact, all the typical symptoms of grief may be evident. It is difficult to comprehend the extent of loneliness that can exist in these circumstances. This is fuelled by the tradition many country people have of not sharing those issues that touch the very depths of their soul and identity. They can have difficulty with this because theirs is a community that rewards success and is critical of failure. The natural independence that is engendered by country living can mean that financial adversity is often met with Stoicism. However, not all have the strength to bear it and the stresses that exist sometimes manifest themselves in physical illness.

People in difficulty sometimes choose not to attend church or any of its fellowship groups. They will only attend them if they can be offered the security of acceptance and understanding. Confidentiality (never easy to protect in a country setting) will be vital. A consequence of this is that a lot of counselling will need to be done privately, on an individual basis. However, it is not always easy to find those who are truly hurting. Guilt and denial make it hard for rural people to speak. This may partly be overcome by taking the initiative and visiting people on the farm. If the issue of confidentiality can be addressed, it may also be possible to network with rural counsellors who's job it is to help those in financial difficulties.

Any rural downturn affects the rural church. This is only proper. Just as Jesus came and shared the pain of humankind, so his church must do the same. Our task is to be Jesus and give hope, perspective and practical support amidst the pain. Some country churches have helped organise support groups to assist communities come to terms with the effects of the rural crisis and the grief of change. One of these groups (a Rural Action Group) consisting of local community and church members was formed in the South Australian mallee town of Pinnaroo in 1991.

The rural crisis of the early 90's has had a direct effect on the amount of time people have and how much travel they can afford. It has also resulted in fewer young people seeking a future on the land. This has meant that farms are not just getting fewer in number and bigger in size but that the average age of farmers in Australia is rising. These factors have had a detrimental effect on many rural activities. Sporting associations have had to restructure and combine with other districts in order to survive. This has caused some grief as sport plays a key role in helping a community celebrate its identity. Rural social groups are territorial and sport helps strengthen the "we" feeling.

It must be remembered that big urban areas are like big ecological systems. They are well buffered against the effects of change.

However, small rural communities are like small ecological systems that are very susceptible to change. This means that any loss, e.g. of a hospital, school, church or football team, has a big impact on the community. Rural towns of less than five thousand have been described as being in terminal decline.[19]

SING A SONG A SIXPENCE

by David Schulz

Sing a song a sixpence,
a pocket full of wheat.
Four and twenty tonne of it,
but prices got him beat.
For when the cheque was opened,
the farmer got a shock,
'cause with all the cost and charges,
He had nearly lost the lot.

Meanwhile:

The Treasurer's in his ivory tower,
gathering all the money.
And others are on holidays
where its nice and sunny.
The Farmer's in the paddock,
Working to the bone;
When along comes his wife who says
"the bank is on the phone."

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PROS AND CONS OF COUNTRY LIVING

Whilst rural communities are famous for supporting ministers with eggs and meat, there are many extra costs to living in the country. It is not uncommon for petrol to be fifteen percent more expensive. Groceries can be twenty percent more expensive and fresh goods may not be very fresh. Small rural towns also lack the variety of goods. Other costs are less obvious. Telephone calls made from an isolated small town are more likely to be at long distance rates and are therefore more expensive. Cars driven long distance on country roads are likely to wear out faster.

Despite the vigorous activities of many volunteer groups, rural areas can lack some basic cultural facilities. There are rural areas, for example, that are unable to receive a radio station that plays classical music. This has been a source of mild grief to some ministers like myself who enjoy both rock and classical music.

There are, however, many positives to living in small country towns. The pace of life is slower and this relaxed pace can allow a greater flexibility in ministry. Many of the facilities in a small town will also be within walking distance. This is not only a great convenience but allows for important social contact. Walking about town allows you to meet people and keep in touch with what is happening. Clergy are known by most of the inhabitants of a small town and are highly visible and valued members of the community. This can throw up opportunities for ministry through the local newspaper or radio. Their high profile also means that they are often invited to attend civic functions.

Locals not only speak of the easy pace of life but talk of their town being a safe place to bring up children. Muggings, drugs, abductions and rape are seen as city phenomenon. Statistics are unlikely to support this belief but there is a sense in which you feel yourself to be amongst friends because so many of the population know you and your children.

Other attractions of rural living include the activities of hunting, cross-country motorbike riding, and fishing. There is an appreciation of space, lack of confinement and a closeness to nature. Locals speak of their sense of belonging and of the easy familiarity they have with those around them. These can be precious things in an otherwise impersonal and hectic world.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1) What has particularly impacted you from reading this chapter?
2) What questions arise from reading the chapter?
3) What social challenges does someone face when moving to a country town?
4) What would you do in:
    - the first two weeks
    - the first two months
    - the first six months

   to integrate and gain respect as a newcomer in a country town?
5) How can the rural church help the poor and those who are perceived as not contributing to the community, without putting the local rural community offside?
6) How can you overcome the loneliness of being new in a community that already has its social connections established?
7) Drought and rural financial crisis can make people feel vulnerable and retreat from others. What can the church do to help overcome this?

Chapter 3
UNDERSTANDING THE AUSTRALIAN FARM

Eighty eight percent of farms in Australia are family farms on which almost all of the labour is provided by the owner-operator and his family. Farming has become a high risk, high cost family business that typically employs outside workers only for seasonal jobs such as harvesting and shearing.[1]

Over the years, Australian farms have become fewer in number and larger in size. The medium size farm of twenty years ago is today's small farm and the former small farm is now the non-viable farm.[2] In fact, it has been estimated that forty percent of South Australian farmers will have left the land between 1980 and 2000 as a result of the unprofitability of farming marginal areas, labour shedding and mechanisation.[3] The proportion of the population living on farms in small country towns is less than half what it was at the end of World War II.[4] This has meant that Australia has become one of the most urbanised countries in the world.

A consequence of this is a feeling amongst farmers that neither the politicians nor most of the Australian public really understand the rural environment or acknowledge its worth.[5] A newspaper report of Professor Blainey's concern with this says:

> *At one stage city people knew something about the country but now they know little about the rural economy.*
>
> *Most new migrants, understandably, had no idea of rural affairs in Australia because they went straight to Sydney and Melbourne and stayed there.*
>
> *However, the heart of the hostility and apathy towards rural Australia was in the Australian born and Australian educated people.*
>
> *Professor Blainey also laid the blame for the rift between country and city at the feet of the Federal Government, which,*

he said, had forgotten the importance of rural Australia to the nation's health and was relying solely on the cities to lift Australia out of economic crisis.[6]

It is important to realise that whilst only five percent of Australia's workforce is directly engaged in agriculture, as much as twenty five percent of the workforce is employed in occupations that are dependent on agriculture.[7] Roy Powell, of the Centre for Agriculture and Resource Economics at the University of New England, puts this figure higher. He has calculated that thirty four percent of the Australian workforce in 1986-87 worked in the total agricultural industry from paddock to plate. This means that each person employed in agricultural production generated, on average, employment for another 5.7 people.[8]

Farmers are some of the few people in Australia that actually produce things. Huge industries of bureaucracy, transport, government, funding and sales exist, but unless things are actually produced, it all comes to nothing. Governments have not had a recent history of giving much support to the rural sector and this has led farmers to wonder at the priority governments give to rural land being occupied. Tim Scholz, president of the South Australian Farmer's Federation asks: "Does it matter if the land is taken over by weeds and vermin? Do we need something out there or do we just let it go?"[9]

Some words from Jeanette Wormald's song *Stuff Me Dead* underscore this sentiment:

STUFF ME DEAD

Chorus: Oh when I'm dead will they stuff me
in a glass case for display?
And type below my story,
The farmer of yesterday?

Verse: In twenty years will we have died,
Officially extinct?
With every day a struggle,
that takes us to the brink.
We're an endangered species
With numbers getting less.
We were once the backbone of the nation,
Now we're in an awful mess.

© Jeanette Wormald, July 1993
(slightly adapted, with permission).

Julian Cribb, science and technology writer for *The Australian*, is also critical of Australian politicians who, he says are too far removed from the process of genuine wealth creation. He makes the point that of the 223 members of Federal Parliament, fewer than ten percent have a background in farming, engineering or science. This, in part, explains why they have not understood the value and potential of rural Australia.[10]

RISK, REWARD AND THE RURAL CRISIS

It is being increasingly felt that the risks Australian farmers are asked to bear are not recognised or adequately rewarded financially. Certainly, a lot is required of our farmers. They are required to be multi-skilled, (part market analyst; farm labourer; accountant; technologically literate; pesticide expert; engineer; vet; mechanic;

butcher; electrician and truck driver). Farmers stand or fall by their own decisions in a difficult industry where the prices received for produce have failed for many years to keep up with the increases in prices they have had to pay for inputs.[11] They have certainly not been given the level of government subsidies that are currently enjoyed by most of their trading competitors for products such as wheat. As such, Aussie farmers feel very vulnerable and unsupported. Too often they have been the victims of political manoeuvring by the main players in the world markets, over which they have little control.

BAA BAA MERINO SHEEP

by David Schulz

Baa, baa merino sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes Sir, yes Sir,
Three bales full.
One goes in taxes,
Costs take another.
Now without the floor price,
There goes the other!

© David Schulz, 1994

The farmers' vulnerability to the vagaries of world market forces is matched only by their vulnerability to the vagaries of the Australian weather. They have therefore learnt to contend with economic downturns and are used to "periodic poverty." Their net incomes fluctuate much more violently from one year to another than that of wage earners or operators of other businesses.[12]

However, the rural crisis of the late 80's and early 90's has been particularly severe. It was estimated in 1993 that over one third of South Australian farmers were living on or below the poverty line.[13]

A number of factors have been responsible for this. Until the deregulation of the financial markets, interest rates for primary producers were controlled and kept slightly below market rates. Because banks could obtain higher returns elsewhere, it was not always easy for farmers to get loans. After deregulation, banks relaxed their lending criteria in order to shore up market share. Many lent money with insufficient regard to commercial reality. On top of this, farms were regarded as having an above average risk and were charged higher interest rates.

Deregulation coincided with the Federal Government's monetary policy that caused interest rates to rise. Those farmers who borrowed extra capital to expand their farm and increase viability were landed with huge increases in debt servicing costs. Unfortunately, this happened at the same time that farm commodity prices fell. A 1992 report to the Select Committee of the South Australian House of Assembly on Rural Finance mentioned that as a result of the removal of the guaranteed minimum price for wheat and the collapse of the floor price for wool, the price for these commodities fell by approximately forty percent.

MY DAD'S BETTER THAN YOURS

A song by Jeanette Wormald

Three little boys were playing an age-old children's game:
"My Dad's better than your Dad" …out of the mouths of babes.

At first it was the tractors, the boys would all compare,
"Ours is bigger than yours," one said. "You beat that, I dare!"

The second lad scratched his head, his face was looking grim;
Then hit upon a great idea. He was sure he'd win.
"Our debt's bigger than yours", he cried. "Thousands, my Dad said.
We're stone flat broke, me mum's lost hope and we're all in the red. "

The final boy thought long and hard. How could he beat that?
Then he recalled what he had heard in the farm on Wattle Flat.
"We're owned by the bank", he bragged. "They're going to liquidate.
We're so special, they want to own us, even our farm's front gate."

© Jeanette Wormald, 1994

This dramatic cut in profitability has reduced the value of people's farms.[14] This has sometimes had disastrous results.

Where a younger family has taken over the farm, many are now unable to repay loans or interest to the banks or to their retired parents. This brings feelings of guilt and stress. Sometimes, parents are unable to receive pensions because of their asset base or because they have passed their asset on to the next generation. Government

regulation deems this to be the voluntary deprivation of one's own income and therefore offers little support.[15]

Some farmers have only drawn a bare subsistence income from their farm for the last four years. They have effectively made no money in that time. However, because they are still employed, they are not eligible for the same benefits given to unemployed people.

One effect of the rural downturn has been to encourage the migration of young people out of rural areas. In the last ten years, inland rural shires have lost a combined total of forty thousand inhabitants.[16] A government interim report on rural poverty asks:

> *What incentive is there for the sons of farmers to return to the family farm and take it over if all they have to look forward to is unpaid debts, old and dangerous equipment, no long term financial gain and the associated financial stress?*[17]

It needs to be said that many farming districts have been losing population for many decades. However, the recent downturn has given it new impetus. Demographic studies have shown that the heartlands of Australia are either static or in decline. The population is drifting particularly towards the towns of the Eastern seaboard and to the area around Perth. This has prompted some to ask, "who will manage the Australian heartland?"[18]

Unfortunately, the environment is often a casualty in times of rural economic downturn. In 1994, a South Australian soil conservation officer was quoted as saying:

> *Landcare is marking time while the recession is on. People are applying short-term solutions because of poverty. In other words, they are mining the soil rather than taking on long-term strategies for management. ...we are concerned about falling nutrient levels of the soil and the fact that some of these farmers are being forced to adopt non sustainable land management practices. ...weeds, vermin and erosion are increasing in locations and, as a board, we have a concern about that.*[19]

Clearly, there is much that needs to be done politically, economically and technically to ensure a future for rural Australia.

THE DILEMMA OF THE BANKS

The last two decades has seen the status of banks and the style of banking change greatly in rural towns. Banks used to be seen as one of the pillars of the community. They were conservative, safe, reputable and generally acknowledged as an asset to the town. The bank manager was almost seen in the same league as the local minister and doctor.

Today, things are very different. The experience of many farmers in the 80's where bank managers encouraged farmers to increase their borrowings only to force them off the farms when they couldn't repay the escalating interest rates on their loans, led to distrust and disillusionment.

Banks also displayed their fallibility in the early 1990's when unwise offshore investments by the bank's management led to the loss of billions of dollars. Their conservative safe image was shattered. Country people were again amongst those who paid the price for the bad decisions made by the bank's management. In a desperate attempt to increase profit and decrease risk, banks reassessed the risk potential of their clients and toughened up their lending parameters. Many farmers now fell below their newly drawn red line and were refused their usual working overdraft upon which they relied to buy seed and sow their crops.

There has also been a change in style of banking. In earlier years, the local manager had the authority to use his discretion in lending money to local people. However, in the new climate of stringency, bank head offices have exerted tighter and tighter controls so that lending decisions are no longer made at a local level. They are

made by formulas senior management have punched into head office computers.

This has had two effects. Firstly, it has highlighted the frustration country people have found who have tried to argue with a head office computer about the financial benefits of a breeding program or of a pasture renovation program will not be felt for some years. Farmers are feeling that people making financial decisions about their farm are city-bound managers who have little understanding of their farm.

If a bank is owed a million dollars by a farmer, the bank may tell the farmer to sell up. But because of falling land prices and the cost of selling, the bank may only recoup $650,000. Banks may therefore suggest that the farmer try and secure a loan from another bank for $700,000 to keep farming. This money is used to pay off the first bank that will then forgive the outstanding $300,000 debt. In this way, the original bank will recoup more money. However, the bank will force the farmer to sign a secrecy agreement so that people in the area don't see the waiving of $300,000 debt as a precedent.

What bothers my bank manager friend is that some farmers who have been foolish and frittered money away are forgiven huge sums of money whilst other prudent battling farmers are not. This dilemma takes on more sinister overtones once rural gossip exaggerates the story. Local people are beginning to ask, on what basis to banks decide which farmers will go broke and which will not? Who decides? Why have banks got this power and are so unaccountable for how they use it?

The once safe, conservative, trusted local bank has indeed lost a lot of ground in country Australia.

Most banks now have a code of practice but problems still occur. Unfortunately, when problems do occur, farmers are reluctant to challenge the banks because they have such a financial hold over

them. There doesn't seem to be a mechanism that allows complaints to be heard without fear of retribution. This is illustrated by an incident investigated by a minister of a Mallee town in South Australia.

A farming family applied for Interest Rate Subsidy through the Rural Assistance Scheme. However, when their bank became aware that they had applied for this help, they increased the interest rate on his loan by two percent. This, it was claimed, was to cover the risk loading of someone who was barely viable and the extra work that such an account was likely to generate. What this meant was that the extra money given by the government in interest rate subsidy did not benefit the farmer at all as he had to pay the equivalent amount to the bank in higher interest charges. In effect, taxpayer's money designed to help farmers was being hijacked by the bank.

The local minister wrote to the bank but was simply told that it was "bank policy." They also said that they would look into it further if the client's name was supplied. However, the farmer was reluctant to allow this because he feared retribution by the bank.

It is felt by some farmers that rural financiers can make financial judgements that can put a farming family through hell, sometimes simply because they don't know enough about the farm. One farmer in South West Queensland had over eighty percent equity and had faithfully paid off his loans from the Queensland Industrial Development Corporation (QIDC) for fifteen years. However, in 1990, low wheat prices meant that he could only pay the interest on his loan.

This persuaded him to apply to QIDC for interest rate subsidy. Although his crops looked excellent, his application was declined. He was advised from Brisbane that they considered him unable to service the loan and offered him Part C Household support which implied that he was non viable and that he must sell the farm.

After much unnecessary stress, the farmer managed to get a farm visit from the regional QIDC manager and a Brisbane officer that resulted in the decision being reversed.[20]

The plea to banks and farm financiers by farmers today is they are careful and fair in their dealings. What may be a red line on a ledger is actually the life of a farming family. Any financial decision concerning them has an enormous human cost and should be carefully considered after weighing up all the facts. At the very least, it should entail a farm visit by someone from the bank that understands farming practice.

POINTING TO THE FUTURE

There is a feeling amongst some farmers that consortiums of urban professionals are buying up some farms so that they can write them off against tax. The gossip from disaffected locals is that the farm managers of such properties not only lack local knowledge but, for tax reasons, are not even interested in making a profit. As such, there is a growing suspicion that some of Australia's best agricultural land will either become hobby farms or a tax avoidance wasteland ...and the worst agricultural land a deserted, weed infested rabbit warren.

Surely, Australians need to value their heartland more highly and look for ways to help their farmers develop their rural potential.

It will be simplistic and cruel to say to farmers in rural crisis that they must diversify. Diversification normally requires new machinery which cash strapped farmers can't afford. However, diversification is important. It is just that it shouldn't be considered as a last resort when farmers may not be able to do it justice. From this it follows that diversification should be planned, both economically and technically. This will not be easy given the relatively low priority Australia gives to science and technology. (Evidently, Australians invest ten billion dollars a year on slow

horses and dogs, and less than three billion on science and technology!)[21]

Julian Cribb notes that only in Australia are the fruits, seeds, vegetables and animals of six different continents farmed. We have a wider range of environments than any other nation and as a result, know about producing more foods than any other nation. The challenge for us is therefore to do it well and to market both quality products as well as our knowledge on how to produce them.

It may be necessary for farm organisations and local governments to buy a strategic slice of the world food processing market and so add value to their products. This may mean going overseas to invest in woollen mills, flourmills, canneries and meatworks in places such as Russia, China and the Asia-Pacific.

Julian suggests that we should provide a permanent computer information database on all goods we have for sale and become leaders in electronic marketing. Computer technology provides a wonderful opportunity for Australia to overcome its physical isolation from many of the major world markets.

He also speaks of the potential provided by our own native animal and plant species and notes with sadness that the world's largest producers of Australian native wildflowers are Holland and Israel; the world's largest eucalypt farmers are Brazil and China; the Finns are selling gum trees to Africa; the Chileans are selling us blue gum described as "Chilean oak" and Thailand is farming barramundi, mud-crabs and tiger prawns.[22]

Business forecaster Phil Ruthven, executive chairman of IBIS Business Information, also speaks of Australia's need to adjust its mindset such that we embrace the marketing possibilities that exist in Asia. He also advocates a revolutionary way the farming sector can redeploy its financial resources.

His suggestion is that farmers should lease their land and simply enter into franchise arrangements to supply agricultural products. This should ensure a guaranteed income from one year to the next. He also suggests that farmers tie up very little money in equipment and subcontract farm work to people who can use their machinery for more than a few weeks a year.[23] Whilst this may make sound economic sense on paper, it does ignore the human factor and possibly the environmental factor. It will be difficult for farmers to identify with the land in the same way if they only lease it. This may result in a temptation to farm it for short-term gain rather than for long-term sustainability.

A Rural Reflection

"TOO MANY FARMERS"

A parliamentary inquiry into rural poverty has said that there are too many farmers. Some just have to go (*Advertiser*, 11th Aug. 1994)

The irony of this is not lost to farmers in a nation with more politicians per head of population than almost anywhere else in the world.

I've also heard some politicians say that farming is a high-risk venture and that if you can't stand the risks, don't farm. It is a simplistic answer that fails to address many systemic factors within our rural set-up that result in farmers not being adequately rewarded for the risks they take. Freight charges, fuel costs, wharf charges and the cost of finance being just a few.

What all these simplistic statements have in common is that they ignore the human side of things.

Is it a good thing for services to be withdrawn from country towns? What is the long term affects of providing minimal health and education facilities? Is it a good thing for small communities to exist at all in the bush?

What value do politicians put on marginal land being occupied and managed? Do they want it to revert to a weed-infested rabbit warren? Do country people have value?

God simply says that if you mess with people's worth; if you mess with people's hearts, then you're messing with something that is very precious to him. People are not just economic units. They need to be respected and given a fair go.

For goodness sake, lets have more understanding, commitment and imagination in developing our heartland. To respond with simplistic statements is to hide from reality. They do nothing to change our rural sector that is in sore need of reform and hope.

---oOo---

Much of our agricultural land is fairly tender and farming it requires an appreciation of local conditions. It needs to be worked in the right way and at the right time. The risk of using contractors is that farmers may loose some of their autonomy and be forced to do things to the land at non-optimal times. This can have consequences both for productivity and the environment.

Clearly, if rural Australia is going to develop its potential, it will need to diversify and find new markets. However, reform will have to be across the board. It is no use producing the products if our transport costs make them uncompetitive, or if markets for them are not found. Neither is it desirable for us to produce goods for other nations to process and thereby take most of the profit.

The Rev. Noel Park, spokesperson on rural issues for the Uniting Church in Queensland, has listed a number of factors that would help rural Australia towards a healthy future.[24] These include:

1) The articulation by all political parties of their commitment to maintaining a rural sector.

2) The development of a national plan for future agriculture that presents concepts for agriculture that the whole of Australia, not just the rural sector can understand.

3) The development of clear policies on sustainable land use (water use, soil conservation, re-vegetation and research into appropriate land use).

4) Increased research into:
   - production
   - marketing
   - management

5) Increased training for:
   - land managers
   - extension officers
   - finance providers
   - marketers
   - government policy advisers

6) The better development of integrated programs to handle floods and droughts.

It is perhaps unfortunate that eighty five percent of political votes come from urban Australia. Political power generally rests with those who have had little experience in agricultural wealth creation. This means that significant political investment in agricultural reform and marketing initiatives will only happen when public appreciation for the rural sector grows.

I once suggested in a church newspaper that it was a pity there were not more marginal seats in rural areas. The Rt. Hon. Neil J. Andrew, Federal Member of Parliament, took exception to this comment and flailed me in the press suggesting that if I knew what I was talking about, I would know that there were more marginal seats in the bush than in our cities. Curious as to how he managed to justify this statement, I asked to see the figures. He was, perhaps, unwise enough to send them. I was horrified to learn that his figures were based on classing everything outside Australia's six largest cities as rural. Canberra was classed the same as a sheep paddock. This sort of evasion of reality by politicians is very disappointing.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1) What has particularly impacted you from reading this chapter?
2) What questions arise from reading the chapter?
3) In what ways is the typical Australian farm changing, and what does this mean for a rural town?
4) "Bequeathing your farm to your children is a form of child abuse." What needs to happen to make this claim less true?
5) What is your reaction to hearing of the behavior of banks in rural communities?
6) What advice would you give a farmer in financial difficulty that was in negotiation with a bank?
7) How could you respect confidentiality yet offer pastoral care to a farmer in financial difficulty?

Chapter 4
UNDERSTANDING RURAL EDUCATION

Over one million students attend school in rural Australia.[1] Most of these schools are government run. In fact, the provision of government schools appears to be particularly important in the country as eighty two percent of rural students attend government schools compared with a national average of seventy-four percent.[2]

Unfortunately, the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows some worrying trends concerning this education.

> *Census data appears to show the rural population as educationally disadvantaged in comparison to the non-rural population. People living in rural areas tended to have left school at an earlier age and to have had lower levels of educational attainment than people in non-rural areas.*[3]

The report does say, however, that the number of rural people with higher levels of academic attainment is likely to be underestimated due to their need to move to urban areas for education and employment opportunities. Nonetheless, the fact remains that people from rural and isolated areas are less likely to qualify for, or seek access to, higher education than their counterparts in metropolitan areas.[4]

A recent study in Western Australia has proven long-standing anecdotal information that city children out-perform their country counterparts in their final year at school. The Education Minister, Mr Norman Moore, in commenting about the report, said that on average, city students achieved a tertiary entrance exam score ten points higher than country students.[5]

Education Departments are extraordinarily sensitive to any suggestion that teaching standards in the country are partly to blame. In this instance, Mr Moore attributed the poorer performance by country students to the lower socio-economic background of rural Australia. This comment is hardly calculated to warm the hearts of country people seeking a “fair go” for their children. What

Mr Moore fails to understand is that good teaching standards is not just a reflection on the quality of teachers, it is also a reflection on facilities and educational diversity that can allow the strengths of students to be best placed for optimum results. These two factors do warrant investigation.

Educationalists have noted that rural young people do have limited educational and occupational aspirations.[6] Certainly, students from rural areas have been identified as one group which tend to leave school early.[7] Data collected in 1989 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that less than one percent of South Australian country teenagers go on to higher education compared with over ten percent from metropolitan areas (Table 1).[8] This is disturbing.

The 1988 "Schooling in Rural Australia" report identifies a number of reasons why students from the country often don't continue their formal education.[9] One of these is the influence of parents, who themselves left school early at a time when rural employment was less dependent on educational qualifications. Some farming parents continue to see their occupation as not being highly dependent on education. In reality, this is not the case, as farming has become less of a lifestyle and more of an expensive, high-risk technological business.

Parents can also affect the educational and occupational aspirations of their children because of their reluctance to encourage their children to leave their home area. The reasons for this can be financial (not having the money to educate their children in the city) and emotional. The emotional cost to a family of having a child live away from home to attend school or college should not be underestimated.

Lower levels of aspiration can further be encouraged by the "brain drain" to the cities of children of professionals based in country towns and of farmers who can afford it. With the absence of children with higher expectations, a lower aspiration can become the norm.

Table 1: Participation in higher education by age group for South Australia
(from: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1989)

Age	Metropolitan	Non-Metropolitan
15 to 19	10.5%	0.8%
20 to 24	13.7%	0.9%

The "Schooling in Rural Australia" report says that whilst the small rural school has the advantage of encouraging an intimate, flexible, family-like atmosphere with community involvement, its disadvantage can be the lack of peer stimulation and competition due to the small number of students.[10] It also notes that small schools have poorer facilities and fewer resources than larger urban schools.

These things can have a profound effect on the expectations and culture of a community. If a church minister were to look for guitarists and a drummer to start a youth band in the local church, the chances are good that such musicians would exist in an urban setting. However, inquiries at a rural Area School of 500 students found only two guitarists.[11]

This can be attributed to the fact there is no face-to-face teaching of music in the classrooms. It is treated as a low priority ...and students pick this up. Music is seen as an optional extra that can only be pursued individually via the DUCT telephone link-up system. It seems that despite the declared intentions of various ministers of education, the availability of educational options continues to be severely limited in the country.

Lower aspirations also come about in rural areas because the variety of job options seen in the city are not available to them. Children cannot aspire to those things they do not know about. The academic ability of a child may make them ideally suited to become a civil engineer, or metallurgist. But if that child's only technical

experience is the motorbike and small engines garage in town, the chances are good that aspirations will lie in that direction.

Against a perceived steady withdrawal of educational facilities from rural areas in the last decade, stands the expressed need for rural students to broaden their educational and occupational horizons. Rural communities are beginning to recognise the need to diversify their local employment and skills base in the face of increasing technology.[12]

The reality is, however, that many country schools lack the facilities that help students to realise their full potential in the crucial years of eleven and twelve.

Phillips and Hallein, researchers into rural secondary colleges in Victoria write:

> *Rural secondary school students studying VCE were distinctly disadvantaged by a lack of resources in school and public libraries and through a lack of community resources. This disadvantage increased with the distance from a larger rural city.*
>
> *To overcome this lack of resource provision, teachers ...in both Chemistry and English were reducing the choices for students.*[13]

Government research also shows that many rural students have an acute problem gaining access to school in years eleven and twelve.[14] The town of Keith (in the South East of South Australia) has an area school of 500 students which caters from reception to year twelve.

In 1994, there were not enough students wanting to do the publicly examined subjects of maths, English, physics and chemistry to justify running classes for them. The few students who wished to do these subjects in year twelve had to go to Bordertown, forty-five kilometres away. The parents of these students needed to find two

thousand dollars at short notice to cover local board and lodging for their children and buy new school uniforms.

The school is now trying to forecast a year in advance those subjects it will be able to offer in year twelve. However, even one year's notice does not give parents the time to plan their children's education. It is no good knowing at the start of year eleven which year twelve subjects will be offered, as it may then be too late to make alternative educational arrangements to ensure that their child gets educational continuity in their final two years.

The difficulties associated with rural education in years eleven and twelve can be exacerbated by the fact that children of some rural families are not eligible for "Austudy" (a government grant for those who study years eleven and twelve at school or who go on to higher education). Children are assessed for their eligibility for "Austudy" on the basis of the value of the assets held by their parents.

Many Australian farmers are asset rich but cash poor. Although, in theory, their farm is worth many hundreds of thousands of dollars, they have very little money to live on. Yet they still have to pay for their children's final years at school and any higher education fees. Some simply cannot afford to send their children to higher education.

Adult education also presents difficulties in rural areas. Fortunately, correspondence courses do exist. However, many of these have a residential component which can pose real problems for mother with children.

One woman living in the South East of South Australia was required to organise a week's stay in Whyalla College campus twice a year for four years. If she has lived in the city, the same course requirements could have been e easily met by attending evening classes at a nearby college.

Research involving over 300 women in country Victoria identified three main barriers to educational opportunities for rural women.[15]

The first was the attitude barrier. Some women felt they had little support from their family who could see education as a luxury they could ill afford (particularly if it took them away from an already short staffed farm). They also reported that their local community could be derisive and suspicious of people with dreams beyond the local norm.

The second was the situational barrier. This included the cost of travel, the difficulty in accessing library resources or childcare, and the need for "catch up" courses to hone up on academic skills prior to undertaking a course of study.

The third difficulty was the systemic barrier. Many women felt that there was nothing to be educated for. There were few jobs available in country, and even less if you were over forty.

The rural community does seem to be educationally disadvantaged in comparison to the non-rural population. Unfortunately, in this age of fiscal meanness and economic rationalism, things are unlikely to change.

What then are the implications of educational inequality for ministry?

Firstly, it is important to be aware of the dynamics of rural education and be sensitive to its difficulties when relating to local people. Note too that local people probably won't enjoy learning that you have sent your children to a city school because you thought their local school was not good enough.

The church is well positioned to be an advocate for the rural community and, as appropriate, represent their educational interests to local, state and federal government. It is also possible to have an input in the running of the school through the school council.

One of the products of indifferent education can be poor self esteem. This can lead to people feeling uncomfortable with church because it is too often seen to be a middle class institution who's members are fairly well educated. (Note: education should not be confused with intelligence. Many country people have a wonderful earthy wisdom about those things that are within the spectrum of their experience.) One of the challenges for the church is therefore to accept people as they are and to demonstrate people's worth through personal friendships. This crossing of class boundaries will not be easy, particularly, as we have said, in a rural community. But Jesus came to ordinary people and so must we. After all, each of us are essential members of one body—the church (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Educational issues also impinge on ministers personally as they wrestle with what to do about the education of their own children. Some have suggested that ministers need have no other call in life other than the call of family? Surely if this were the case, no missionary would ever leave home. Ministers therefore have to ponder the extent to which they can trust God for the education of their children and accept a parish in the country whilst they have dependent children.

The issue of the minister's spouse working is also involved. Some small rural towns do not have employment available in the areas of the spouse's training. Where this happens, it is nearly impossible for a minister to afford to send any children to the city for schooling.

This problem is not confined to ministers. An article in *The Medical Journal of Australia* which investigates the shortage of general practitioners in rural Australia says:

> *The greatest social problems faced by rural doctors and their families are the education of their children, a relative absence of privacy and lack of time off duty and off call. The partner suffers from diminished career opportunities...*[16]

Doctors do, however, have higher salaries than ministers and this allows them more options. Even so:

> *City general practitioners have better access to postgraduate education and have a wider range of choice of education for their children.*[17]

Again, a vicious circle seems to operate. Services are taken away from a small rural town for reasons of economic rationalism, e.g. educational options for children are withdrawn. This in turn causes professional people to be reluctant to live in small rural communities—which further encourages their decline.[18]

Some ministers elect to stay in the city so that their spouse can find work in order to put their children through private schools. Other spouses elect to help in their partner's rural ministry. What they may sacrifice, however, is any chance that their children will attend schools with better educational options.

Spouses may also want to pursue a career for their own sake. If this is the case, it is unlikely that they will want to move to a small country town unless work of a suitable nature can be found there.

The whole question of one's faith, ethics and ministry is called into question when considering these issues. The church can help by recognising the sacrifices some families might be called to make in going to the country. Church government bodies might even negotiate with church schools on their behalf so that special places be made available at minimal cost to the children of ministers living in rural areas where jobs for spouses are not available.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1) What has particularly impacted you from reading this chapter?
2) What questions arise from reading the chapter?
3) What are the pros and cons of a rural family sending their child to be educated in a boarding school?
4) The effectiveness and quality of teaching depends above all else on the quality of the teacher. What can be done to help country towns attract and retain the best teachers?
5) How can a rural church community help foster a culture of excellence in its school?
6) What can a church do to encourage meaningful, accessible education for rural women?

Chapter 5
UNDERSTANDING RURAL HEALTH

A paper by Allan Kellehear in the "Regional Journal of Social Issues" examines country health, particularly in the light of the rural crisis. He argues that issues of politics and economics are just as important as issues of distance and climate when considering country health. He notes that twelve percent of Australians are rural dwellers and in terms of the provision of health, must be considered just as disadvantaged as other groups commonly held to be so.

> *Finally, until government recognises the regional nature of community health problems in the context of a declining rural economy, rural dwellers should be promoted as a disadvantaged group with special needs. Rural dwellers should be a category beside women, the aged, migrants and defence force personnel as legitimate claimants to special consideration. This is not to ignore or play down issues of inequality that relate to class, gender or ethnicity. Rather, regional position must be seen as a genuinely significant problem of inequality in its own right.*[1]

It might be expected that the fresh air and healthy outdoor life of the country would make for a healthier environment. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case. Kellehear writes:

> *"Rural health problems are significantly worse than state or national levels. Of particular note are the higher levels of motor vehicle accidents, suicide, venereal disease, allergies, skin cancers and psychiatric morbidity."*[2]

The increased incidence of medical problems reported by Kellehear cannot be attributed to country people needing less of an excuse to visit their doctor. In fact, the reverse seems to be the case. The prescribing habits of some New South Wales practices found that:

> *...hypnosedatives were used by 61 percent of those attending metropolitan practices, but only by 33 percent of those who were attending non metropolitan practices. Again, does this*

mean country patients have a more stoical attitude to their symptoms?[3]

A report from the Australian National University also shows that both male and female rural people tend to visit doctors less when they suspected illness.[4]

Qualities of Stoicism and toughness seem to be particularly lauded in rural communities. Many don't seek help even when it is available. Kellehear speculates whether this cultural value is shaped by the rural requirement for toughness and independence engendered by their geographic isolation.[5]

Certainly, it is by no means unusual to come across situations like that of a farming friend of mine from Culburra, South Australia who cut most of his finger off in the cutter bar of a harvester. He simply put it back into place and taped it up. Luckily, it healed well and most of the movement has returned. Rural life certainly has physical risks. At the Uniting Church in Brooklyn Park, Adelaide, where I previously lived, I knew of only one person who had cut their finger off. In my own rural parish of Keith-Tintinara, I know of seven people who have cut fingers off (with V belts, cutter bars, mincers, electric planers and engine fly wheels). Life in the country seems to be inherently more dangerous because of the rural reliance on machinery. The 1994 Australian National University paper reports that country people are fifty percent more likely to die in traffic accidents and that rural males are over sixty percent more likely to die through injury or poison.[6]

This University report dispels the myth that life is healthier in the country and shows clearly that rural dwellers are more likely to become sick and to die early. It also explodes the myth that city dwellers subsidise the rural population by showing that Government spends less on rural patients.

It is therefore ironic that just when it has been shown that country Australia doesn't get its fair share of health funding (even though

rural needs are particularly acute) more and more medical services have been withdrawn to urban areas. Kellehear makes this point.

> *...as cities and regional centres grow, surrounding areas are marginalised. These lose services, facilities and industries to urban areas.*[7]

This is true for both private and public health facilities.

The issue of private health cover is particularly important in the country. Farming is not an occupation that one can take time off from at any time to have an operation. Because of this, many farmers take out private health cover. However, the rural crisis has forced some of them to cancel their membership. This has threatened the viability of many small private hospitals

Public hospitals in many country towns have also closed. The closure of a hospital, for whatever reason, can cause real anxiety amongst rural people, particularly the elderly who may have moved into town from the farm to be in close proximity to it.

The withdrawal of local health services (and other specialist services such as the Child Development Unit and psychiatric services) into regional urban centres places an added burden of travel onto country people. A colleague writing to me from a mallee town in North West Victoria said:

> *Whilst we still retain our hospital, the services have been reduced. People with more serious conditions are now sent to the regional centre 100 kilometres away. Unfortunately, ambulance and public transport reductions have made even this more difficult, throwing the burden on families and friends for transport. (An aside: A visiting dignitary's advice to 'Get at taxi—there is assistance available' overlooked the fact that the nearest taxi was also at the regional centre 100 kilometres away!)*

In seeking to explain why rural areas get so little medical funding Kellehear writes:

> *The Australian Medical Association and the hospital lobby groups place a high value on research treatments which are urban-based and high technology oriented. IVF programmes, organ transplant programmes and the number of acute care places in hospitals are more newsworthy and vote gaining. They are also very costly.*[8]

A consequence of this is that rural towns of less than ten thousand people experience considerable disadvantage in service provision. A survey of parents of disabled children in rural areas found that fourteen percent of these had no service provision for their needs and that respite care was virtually non-existent.[9] The population-to-GP ratio is also often very high. Humphreys and Rolley highlighted some of these problems in their 1993 paper to the Second National Rural Health Conference:

> *Over recent years it has become apparent that rural inhabitants face markedly higher population-to-GP ratios than elsewhere in Australia, an under-supply of health personnel (such as specialists, dentists, social workers, allied health professionals and community nurses), and are characterised by greater problems of inequity both in terms of availability of services ...and geographical access to them.*[10]

In fact, it can be very difficult to get doctors to go to the country and those that do come tend not to stay very long.[11] It is significant that those that do stay are generally those who have grown up in the country.[12]

Professor Bob Douglas from the Australian National University says: "By the time a specialist becomes independent and capable of moving to a rural area, he or she is often married to someone with city-based career needs and a family approaching high school age."[13]

It may be significant that those medical problems associated with low morale are those that feature highly in Kellehear's list of health problems particularly significant in rural areas. These include motor

vehicle accidents and venereal disease (if due to risk-taking behaviour), suicide and psychiatric morbidity.

The Australian National University report also shows that rural women tend to be more overweight and to smoke more than their city cousins, although, interestingly, they drank less.[14] Kellehear notes that poverty is more widespread in rural areas and unemployment is approximately three times the national average.[15] These would seem to be likely causes of poor morale.

Information collected by the Australian Catholic Welfare Commission indicates that:

> *Increases in Australia's national suicide rate, particularly amongst teenagers and the 40-45 age group, have been directly related to the rural crisis. ...For example, the rate of suicide for 15-19 year old males in rural shires/municipalities has increased more than five fold during the period 1964-88.*[16]

Susan Oliver from the "Commission for the Future" spoke in a radio interview of the high suicide rate, binge drinking and mental illness that occurs amongst Australian young people.[17] She too mentioned that one of the highest suicide rates in the world occurs amongst our young rural men. This is born out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of suicides per 100,000 people

(Selected figures from the 1990 - 1992 census data compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.)

	People aged 20 - 24	
	Male	Female
State capital city	34.7	7.2
Major urban city	36.7	6.3
Towns typically between 14,000 and 18,000 people (or over 7,000 people but adjoining a major urban city)	40.0	5.2
Rural areas	51.4	8.3
Large remote towns (e.g. Broken Hill)	31.9	4.0
Remote areas	62.3	9.8

We need to ask then why it is that rural young men in Australia find less reason to live? To simply blame poverty and unemployment may be simplistic. We also need to ask questions about their sense of meaning, hope and self esteem.

In speaking about the self-destructive and anti-social behaviour of young people, Richard Eckersley talks of Australia's "emotional harshness.[18] Perhaps this is significant. Rural communities encourage a social norm of behaviour amongst their young men. It is typically one of hard driving, hard drinking, Stoicism, independence and intolerance of others outside their own mould.[19]

This would have to be described as being "emotionally harsh." The human soul cries out for so much more than that which is allowed by the macho stereotype.

Eckersley, (not himself a practising member of any religion), also speaks of Australia's "spiritual desiccation." By spiritual, he doesn't just mean belief in God but also a deep sense of "relatedness" to the world around us, i.e. a sense of identity, meaning and purpose. He goes on to say:

> *Robbed of a broader meaning to our lives, we appear to have entered an era of mass obsession, usually with ourselves: our appearance, our health and fitness, our work, our sex lives, our children's performance, our personal development.*[20]

The standards secular Australia now uses to define its identity, e.g. career paths, lifestyle choices, children's education, fashion, etc., seem largely to be urban orientated. It may be that rural Australians may see themselves as being less able to compete. If so, it may help explain the lack of self esteem suffered by so many of them.

Country communities can also have a sense of hopelessness that results from not being in control of those factors that affect their life. The magnitude of risk that modern farmers have to contend with in these days is huge—and is increasing. The cost of machinery, sprays, fuel and fertiliser have steadily increased so that it now costs many thousands of dollars to sow a crop. The vagaries of the Australian climate (now exacerbated by climate change) and capriciousness of international markets means that the farmer cannot know if these costs are going to be recovered.

There is a sense in which many farmers in the rural recession feel themselves to be on a hopeless treadmill from which they cannot escape. This feeling of powerlessness has been exacerbated by the steady withdrawal of services from rural communities over the last decade. Let me quote again from the 1988 "Schooling in Rural Australia" report:

> *Many rural people feel themselves to be 'away from the centre of things'. ...They feel distant from political power, involvement in decision making, cultural activities, and specialist diagnostic and treatment services relating to medical, psychological, disability and learning problems. ...Linked to the feeling of being away from the centre of things is a sense of 'being under threat': the threat being that, particularly in times of economic difficulty, local services will be curtailed.*[21]

Decisions have been made by city politicians and bureaucrats on what services will be removed from rural communities on the basis of economics. Little thought has been given to the social ramifications of these decisions. Unfortunately, the rural sector does not have much influence on the decision makers. Its political clout has decreased along with its relative contribution to the Gross Domestic Product. (The rural contribution to GDP decreased from 10.9% in 1961 to 2.6% in 1992. The contribution agriculture has made to the nation's exports has also fallen. Rural products accounted for over eighty five percent of the nation's exports in the early 1950's but this has steadily declined to around twenty five percent in the early 1990's.[22]

The decrease in the economic significance of the rural sector may also be compounded by the relatively low percentage of political votes that represent the interests of country people. Nigel Austin, writing in the *Advertiser* says:

> *Unquestionably, infrastructure has been stripped from rural Australia at an unprecedented rate in the past decade, sometimes justifiably, but, because there are few votes in the country, the issue of developing the inland receives far too little attention politically.*[23]

The sense of powerlessness engendered by these factors can help promote feelings of helplessness and despair that may help predispose some of our rural people to suicide.

Unfortunately, there is very little hard data available to give us a good understanding of why rural areas suffer different medical problems from the city. However, in the light of what we do know, the following conclusions can reasonably be drawn. Firstly, rural communities have special medical needs and these needs are currently not being met adequately. Secondly, rural health issues are intimately bound up with social, political, economic and religious factors and should therefore be addressed on all fronts.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1) What has particularly impacted you from reading this chapter?
2) What questions arise from reading the chapter?
3) How would you describe the particular health challenges of an Australian rural community?
4) Lack of meaning and lack of hope are two factors that help fuel the suicide rate of young rural men. What can the church do in a country community to combat this?
5) How can the church work with health professionals in country towns to improve health outcomes for the community (particularly against a background of medical facilities being withdrawn from rural towns).
6) How can a church community help manage the morale and sense of wellbeing of a rural community?

Chapter 6
SEEKING THE WAY AHEAD

What then is the future? Are there things that we can work towards which give us hope that meaningful life can exist in the country and that the rural church has a key role to play? How real is this hope? Is it more than the collection of "positives" that writers commonly reserve for the final chapters of their books?

To have a hope to work towards, we need first to find some tools that will help us get there. The tool I want to uncover is theology. I do this because I am possessed by the conviction that if we understand God's heart we will uncover a hope that will sustain us.

IS CHRISTIANITY MAINLY FOR TOWNS?

The first theological hypothesis to examine is that God is active in rural areas and cares about what happens there. This could be in doubt. If you went to a Christian bookshop and read the books on "how to grow your church"; and "how to do effective ministry", you might be forgiven for thinking that ninety nine percent of the spiritual action happens in the urban setting. Small Australian wheat towns don't have many "mega-churches" with a team of full-time ministers who preside over a network of weekly home fellowships each led by articulate trained leaders. Visiting international speakers usually confine their engagements to city venues. All theological colleges, theological libraries and church administrative centres are based in urban centres. They make the decisions and set the agenda. So maybe it's true, maybe God is just a God of the cities.

This was precisely the heresy that the Hebrew people had to unlearn when Moses and Joshua led them from Egypt through the desert into the Promised Land. The radical truth God needed to impress upon them was that *Yahweh* was no local god, a mere god of the

hills, or god of the plains. *Yahweh* was the one true God who went with his people wherever they went. God is Lord of all.

The same is true today. God is also the God of rural Australia.

But does God care for rural Australia?

There can be no study of the Bible that can come to any other conclusion than that we are objects of God's love. The whole reason God created the universe in the first place was so that he could share his love with us. The loving nature of God is powerfully spelt out in the first epistle of John:

> *Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*
>
> (1 John 4:7-10)

A study of Ephesians 2:1-10 underlines another dimension of this love, namely, God loves us even when we are sinners who don't acknowledge him. Jesus was criticised by the Pharisees for choosing the company of those who did not keep the law. It is perhaps significant that the name the Pharisees gave such people translates literally as "the people of the land." The Pharisees judged such people; Jesus loved them. This makes it clear that God's love is not conditional. The God of rural Australia is a God of love.

THE RURAL NATURE OF GOD

It is also worth noting that when God came to us as Jesus, God chose to come to a setting that was largely rural. Jesus himself was possessed of an earthy country wit and his teachings were rich in rural imagery. God understands and identifies with country communities ...and embraces them with his love.

Let me talk about "wheat seed theology." We live today in a high-speed world: jet travel, information super-highways, instant money and push button music. Some of this has necessarily crept into the church. It must do if the church is to reach people in a way that is culturally relevant. However, we need to be careful however that we don't impose our human predilection for pace onto God ...or necessarily think that doing good things for God means doing things at a furious pace. God is every bit as interested in life's journey as our destination. The Bible often uses the analogy of God being the farmer who plants the wheat seed (Matthew 13:1-30) ...and waits for them to grow in the full expectation that they will bear fruit in due time.

Being fast does not necessarily mean being Godly. In fact, God's character has much in common with the patience and persistence required for farming. Rural patience and pace of life possibly reflects God's nature better than the feverish pace of urban living.

> *Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm*.
>
> (James 5:7-8)

The Japanese missionary Kosuke Koyama reminds us that God does things at "oxcart speed" in contrast to our technocratic society that moves at supersonic speed. He reminds us that God was content to wander with his people for forty years, patiently teaching them so that they would become a holy nation (Deuteronomy 8:2-4). God is not so much a Western God of jet planes so much as a God of ox carts. He wants us to be able to savour the journey of life, to notice things, to have time to think, to have time to get off and explore. Above all, God wants to walk with us. Kosuke says: "In his divine slowness, God reveals the mystery of his efficient creation."[1]

The long-term view of farmers, their patience, persistence and slower pace of life has much in common with God. Patience is the nature of God's rule. It has the power to transform.

As such, patience is more than passive endurance amidst temporary evils. It is the active power of faith that knows that God will restore all things to himself in Christ. It does not call us to tolerate evil. Evil should be challenged wherever it is found. However, patience does enable us to live patiently amongst the reality of evil, to work against it in the full assurance that God will have the final word.

Rural theology acknowledges the value of small beginnings. The Bible speaks of the value of making a start with what little faith we have. It is the parable of the mustard seed, the smallest seed used by a Palestinian farmer living in the time of Jesus. Jesus said that if this mustard seed were nurtured, it would grow big enough to allow the birds to rest on its branches (Matthew 13:31-32).

Rural theology notes that God expects growth and development. The theme of God nurturing us so that we bear fruit is a persistent one in the Bible (Luke 8:15, 13:6-7; John 15:1-8; Romans 7:4; Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:10). From this it follows that God is a God of change. A wheat seed is not allowed to remain a wheat seed. It must risk surrendering itself if it is to grow into a wheat plant able to bear more seed. Rural theology understands that God is a God who is prepared to take risks that not all will go according to plan in order to get a crop (Mark 4:1-8). God is a God of growth and change.

More will be said of this later.

GOD'S MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR RURAL AUSTRALIA

What is it then, that God wants for the people of rural Australia?

God is primarily looking for a loving friendship with the people of rural Australia. To love God has always been our basic purpose (Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12-13; 30:16). We also learn in Genesis 1:20-25 that everything God made was good. In other words, everything, including rural Australia, has inherent value to God. The Bible does not differentiate a peasant class. All have inherent value.

The Genesis story teaches us that we are to subdue the land (much as you would an unruly garden) and make it fruitful. The Hebrew word for subdue can also mean violate but this is not its meaning here. The bible teaches that we are stewards of God's property (Leviticus 25:23) and that we should take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

It is certainly not God's intention that land be empty (Leviticus 45:18) or unproductive. Neither is it God's wish that short term expediency and greed should lead us to desecrate and despoil the land. Self-interest that does not acknowledge God or the needs of others is simply called sin.

This leads us to one of the most consistent teachings in the Old Testament. It is this: One consequence of sin is that land becomes unproductive (Leviticus 18:25-27; Numbers 35:33-35; Isaiah 24:1-6; Jeremiah 2:7-8; 3:2-3). So when the Old Testament speaks of "sin defiling the land", it is more than a comment on the morality of the people. Rebellion against God usually results in good land being laid waste (Psalm 68:6; 107:34; Jeremiah 9:12-13; 12:4; Ezekiel 15:8; Hosea 4:1-3).

Sin and lack of productivity represent a departure from God's will. Being careless of our land (environmentally and economically) goes hand in hand with being careless about God (Jeremiah 12:10-13).

The economic and environmental desolation of today is a powerful symbol of our need to return to God's ways. It is a symbol of our need to honour God and each other. God is looking to his church to lead the way in this.

From this it follows that the church must be in solidarity with the rural community and be an advocate for them in their pursuit of fairness and justice. "Solidarity" is a much overused word these days which can have all sorts of left-wing socialist connotations. However, in our doing of theology, I simply want to point to the life of Jesus and the solidarity he showed.

Jesus chose to befriend and live amongst those who were poor, hurting and despised. This is why it is essential that the church be particularly active amongst those rural communities suffering from poor self-esteem, economic alienation and social disintegration. These will be the places that Jesus chooses to be.

These then are some of the foundational theological tools we can equip ourselves with to help us craft an appropriate and effective ministry in rural areas. I now want to develop this theology further as we look at three particular functions of the rural church:

- The management of CARE
- The management of JUSTICE
- The management of CHANGE.

However, in preparation for this, I want first to address a problem.

ADJUSTING A MINDSET

Although the status of the church has waned over recent decades in our society, its capacity to be a formative influence in rural communities is still significant. Most people in a rural community know where the church is and who the minister is. However, one of the reasons the church has not always been significant in rural

towns has been the existence of a debilitating mindset. Let me explain by telling you a story.

For some time, as I have mentioned, we ran a drop-in centre for youth at our church at Keith on Friday nights. It was quite successful in attracting a broad cross section of youth including the young unemployed for whom many in the town have little respect. From time to time, I have asked them why they don't give church a go and come along. Their usual reply is "But we don't dress like they do." My reply is typically, "Tell me what you're going to wear and I'll wear the same—and I'm the preacher!" They laugh at my apparent naiveté and say, "Nick, we're not respectable enough."

I mused on this and decided that at our 60 second "gospel spot" (which we had each Friday night at the drop-in centre), I would put my motorbike in the middle of the church and invite the young people to have a good look at it. I would then say something like: "This bike is in the middle of our church to remind you that church is for ordinary people like you ...because Jesus came for ordinary people like you ...which makes this church a place for ordinary people like you."

On the same week I planned to do this, I had been invited to co-host a local radio show which was seeking to raise money to help the radio station stay on air. I was only too pleased to help, particularly as I was able to give the gospel a plug. Whilst on air, a local District Councillor rang in and I found it irresistible not to make him a deal. I would ride my motorbike up the centre aisle of the church if he would donate $50 to the appeal. He agreed.

So I rode the motorbike up the centre aisle of the church and also made my speech to the young people. Whilst I made it plain that the bike was in the church for the sake of the gospel not the $50 dollars, some church people wanted me to stress that the church couldn't be seen to be using its property to support non-Christian community things. Passages quoting Jesus driving out money-changers from the temple were mentioned.

There is obvious truth in this. Worship of God should not be compromised by people's greed. However, this was not all that was being said. There was also the suggestion that the church must distance itself from the local community and keep itself unsullied. It is this I want to challenge.

Jesus was frequently criticised because he ate with despised tax collectors and other sinful people. (It is interesting to note how much of Jesus' ministry was centred around meals.) These people were not at all respectable but they were the people Jesus chose to associate with because they were the ones who needed him the most (Luke 5:29-32).

If the church is to lead the community in its management of justice and change, it too must be intimately involved with the people of the community. It is only by doing this that the church will pick up its ministry.

MANAGING CARE

When Jesus lived amongst us, we did not see God in disguise, we saw God. This God, our Lord Jesus, showed that he had time for people ...and was particularly attracted to the hurting, the outcast and the needy, so much so that he incurred the scorn of the religious leaders of his day, (Matthew 9:9-13).

The problem with rural churchmanship today is that ministers can be so thinly spread amongst so many small population centres that they are flat out trying to cover the basic demands of church. This allows them very little time to invest in the local community or with people who are outside the church. This is particularly a problem given that farming families in trouble will not generally go to self-help groups to talk their feelings through. It is difficult enough to get rural men to share their feelings with a close friend, so it will be particularly difficult to get them to do this in a larger group. This

means that initial ministry needs to be one on one. Ministers and counsellors will need to make the first move and visit people on their farms.

This reality was dealt with well by the Rural Communities Policy Unit of the Queensland Office of Cabinet. They asked "Lifeline" to undertake a farm visitation program in the Darling Downs and South West Queensland to gain an understanding of what was happening and to let rural people know what help was available to them. In 1992, 1,737 farm visits were made and 1,093 people were interviewed. As a result of this, many rural families were able to unburden their grief and fears with someone "safe", someone trained to listen and committed to caring.

In their report on the project entitled "A Response to Drought" they conclude by saying: "The overwhelming message from this project is that the most effective way to (help rural families) is to visit people in their own homes and provide the needed information and support." The report also includes a section on churches which says:

> *It was not intended that this project should make any assessment of the pastoral care offered by churches throughout the area. However, it becomes clear that only a limited number of congregations provide regular visitation to farm families. There can be little doubt that pastoral visits by clergy or church representatives could have provided a much needed care for many families.*

It goes on to gently challenge the church to recover its central role of caring for people rather than seeking to help rural people by simply engaging in academic debate about government trade policies.[2]

In seeking to help rural people, church carers need to be mindful of the symptoms of stress and grief that many farmers suffer from. The nature of rural economic grief is different from that normally encountered with bushfire, factory accident or bus crash. These events are short lived. Those involved in it can undergo "critical

incident debriefing" with other colleagues involved. However, for farmers in rural recession, there is no critical incident. Theirs is a prolonged malaise that does not affect everyone equally in the community. Their is also no naturally occurring group of colleagues which whom they can debrief. Because they lack of emotional support, many farmers feel alienated and helpless.

The challenge for church carers is therefore to:

- Visit people on their farm
- Be prepared to listen. Some gentle opening questions help in this. A questionnaire may help give you permission to ask specific questions but only use this as a tool and be prepared to depart from it. The questionnaire used by "Lifeline" in South West Queensland is contained at the back of their report.[3]
- Encourage people to express their feelings
- Be aware of existing support facilities and be prepared to refer people to them.
- Be ready to help people's understanding about God, guilt, and why bad things happen to people (because unhelpful understandings do exist).

Care workers should also be familiar with grief and stress symptoms. These include anger, frustration, guilt, lethargy, fear, a sense of failure, guilt and isolation. An excellent pamphlet on stress is produced by the Dalby Cotton Classic Committee entitled "Stress—Getting Through Hard Times."[4] These can be left at farms that are visited.

It is worth pondering some of the "God questions" that are commonly thrown at church people when they visit people in stress. One is the question of guilt. Some people believe that God has sent hard economic times to punishing them.

The real difficulty with this thinking is that guilt is not entirely wrong. We are all guilty and have all fallen short of God's standards of holiness. We all make poor choices sometimes.

However, to think for one moment that God has particularly singled out rural people for retribution is an appalling idea. God invites us all to repent so that we can have a new beginning unshackled from the failures of the past. Repentance allows us to embrace the future with hope.

Another truth that can be gently shared is that bad things do sometimes happen to good people. A Bible story that helps explain this is the story of Job. The essentials of the story have been encapsulated in part of a sermon written by Gordon Ewin from which I quote:

> *There was this bloke who ran into a bit of trouble.*
>
> *First his sheep got anthrax and he lost the lot. It happened to be in the middle of a three-year drought during which his crops failed.*
>
> *The drought broke, as it usually did, with a downpour that brought floods. The floods undermined this bloke's house and it collapsed on his kids, killing the lot.*
>
> *Because of his poor diet, the poor chap got scurvy. He was sore from head to foot. At this point his missus took off with the local stock agent!*
>
> *But his friends stuck by him. "Why don't you chuck it in?" they urged. "You must have done something wrong.*
>
> *"By God," he said, "I haven't. I won't chuck it in. It's not my fault. I don't know why this has happened or what caused it, but this I do know: things will come good. Even if I die, somehow it will all turn out okay for me."*[5]

Job's story answers two temptations felt by many farmers experiencing hard times. The first is the temptation to feel excessive guilt even though most of the factors causing difficulties are outside their control. It teaches that bad things can happen to good people—but that God never abandons them in their troubles.

The second temptation is to give up hope. Job didn't, and neither should we.

Allied to the question of why bad things happen to good people is an expectation by some people that God should be a "good time god" who ensures that good things happen to you. Christianity is reduced to being a "fertility religion."

David Sloane, answers this well in the December 1994 issue of "Ruminations":

> *During the history of Israel, many of its kings turned away from the worship of the one true God to the worship of pagan fertility gods like the one known as Baal. Ahab (874-852 BC) was one such King who expected the Baal god to produce rain and good crops. When the prophet Elijah confronted Ahab to announce a coming drought (1 Kings 17:1) it was to show the King that his priests of Baal were powerless to make it rain. Hence their fertility religion was a fraud.*[6]

Life is an invitation to a loving relationship with God. That is what Christianity is about. It is not about superstitions that ensure a trouble-free life.

The issue of suffering brings us to the question often asked by those experiencing difficulty of how does God rule today? What control does God have over droughts and financial markets?

Whilst it is good to have thought through these issues, be careful not to lay simplistic answers onto grieving farmers. They must be allowed to get angry at God, to question and to grieve their grief through. When the time is right, you can gently share your conviction of what is true and give a reason for the hope that is within you.

At the heart of the issue are three statements, only two of which can be true. These are:

- God is all loving
- God is all powerful
- Pain and suffering is a reality.

If God is all loving, how can he allow pain and suffering, unless of course, God is not all-powerful. Perhaps God is all-powerful but God is not very loving and so allows pain and suffering. Whatever permutation you have, only two of the three statements can be true.

The church father, Irenaeus (who lived about 130 to 200 AD) suggested that God is all loving and all-powerful but has decreed pain and suffering because ultimately it will all work out for good. Sadly, I have seen too much arbitrary and apparently senseless violence to be convinced that this is true. I rather think that a better understanding might come from examining what is meant by God being "all-powerful."

What if God is all powerful but chooses to step back and limit his show of power so that people can freely choose to be friends with God without being compelled to do so by supernatural shows of strength. Maybe God allows us to experience the consequences of a world that has chosen not to live according to God's ways.

By stepping back behind the veil of mystery, God has ensured that he can only be known through the humbling door of faith. God has not chosen to be known through scientific or intellectual study alone, for such would favour the academic. God has chosen faith (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is the great leveller that places all of us on the same footing. This is why Jesus taught that unless we have the humble faith of a child, we will not enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 11:25; 18:4; Mark 10:15). God never seems to compromise this need for faith. We need to have faith to know the object of faith.

It can be argued that this faith formula is one that would also enable you to believe in fairies at the bottom of your garden. The essential difference, however, is that following the "leap of faith," God proves true and fairies do not.

It has been the experience of Christians over many centuries that nothing so satisfies the very depths of our being as a love relationship with God. They give testimony that God does involve himself in the affairs of people who have responded to God's offer of friendship, but that God always does so in a way that retains the need for faith. No miracle is so compelling that it can be believed without faith.

Many Third World Christians are teaching us that the lack of faith in our churches is a reason why God has not been involved in our lives as much as he offers to be involved. I believe this to be true. However, even amongst the most faithful Christians, not everyone avoids drought and bankruptcy. Christians still die in earthquakes and car accidents. Things are not perfect for them. As we have said, they can't be perfect if people are going to embrace Christianity simply to avoid bad things happening to them. That would make for an inauthentic relationship that is not freely chosen.

The necessity for God to be hidden behind a veil of faith indicates that the nature of our current relationship with God is incomplete. It is not only incomplete for us but also for God. He too wants a complete relationship with us and, like us, suffers in its absence. In fact, we see some of the pain this costs him when we see Jesus on a cross. However, Christians believe that this incompleteness points to a future that will be wholly complete. They believe that life is but an imperfect prelude, consisting of both joy and pain, in which the reality of God can only be known by faith. After this prelude, those who have chosen a friendship with God will share the "new order" with God when he reveals all things and makes all things new.

For now we see into a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully...
(1 Corinthians 13:12)

Christians therefore look forward to a future complete relationship with God, which will be the final triumph of God's purposive action.

Christianity therefore acknowledges the reality of pain. (It is also very important to do this in pastoral visits to grieving people.) It also acknowledges that evil is not of God but that God can work through it for good. In particular, however, it acknowledges that God will not allow an imperfect system to continue forever. God has set a time when this imperfect world will end and all things will be made new. God will have the last word.

A Rural Reflection

THE RABBIT TRAP

There's a rabbit trap sitting in the corner of a shelf in my study. It is old and rusty. The frame of the trap is shaped in a cross.

Whenever I am tempted to forget that it doesn't matter much to God what I do, or that Christianity is just people doing "nice" things ...I look at that rabbit trap cross.

It is cruel. It kills slowly. It is just like the cross that Jesus died on.

If words were enough to tell us of God's love, he would have shouted down from heaven. As it was, God sent his son Jesus to show us what he was like and to die on a cross for us to take the blame for the bad things we have done that would otherwise keep us from a holy God.

God's love cost him a lot. Let's not disregard it or take it lightly.

---oOo---

MANAGING JUSTICE

God is a God who is vitally concerned with justice (Exodus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:20; Psalm 11:7; Isaiah 58:6-7; Zechariah 7:9). Justice is an aspect of love. We cannot love each other and be indifferent to the injustices that exist amongst us. Injustice will thrive only as long as "uncaring" exists, particularly in the form of self-interest and indifference.

There are religious philosophies in the world that teach that if we see an injustice being committed, we must simply change our perception of what is evil. We shouldn't get upset by it but simply adjust our thinking. However, God does not allow us this option of escapism. We are not to squeeze around the edges of evil and adapt ourselves to cope with it. Evil must be addressed wherever it exists. It is proper that a sense of injustice remain as long as injustice exists.

A theology of justice, particularly as it pertains to the rural community, can be distilled from the teachings of the prophet Amos, who lived in Israel in the eighth century BC.

The situation was this: Up until the tenth century BC a tribal system of land tenure existed which helped ensure equity in living standards. Every tribe and village had to grow food to eat. However, with the advent of the monarchy in Israel, a new pattern based on central administration and bureaucracy emerged which led to social stratification. Under the monarchy, a feif system developed where the privileged rich exploited the peasants by charging exorbitant interest. This injustice was often compounded by the rich people's habit of using weighing scales that were "doctored."

So, by Amos' time, power had become centralised in urban areas. The peasants were often in such dire straits that they had to mortgage their own clothes. When this failed, they were forced to

become tenants of their own property. As tenants, they were obliged to grow luxury items for their rich landlords, e.g. olive oil and wine, rather than food to feed themselves. (The situation is similar to that of today where cash crops have to be grown by poor countries instead of food in order to pay off foreign debts.) Where peasants were allowed to grow their own food, they were forced to buy the seed from the rich landowners who sold them only the poorest quality wheat. Many peasants were driven into so much debt that they had to be sold into slavery. Denial of any form of justice in the law courts made this rule of violence complete.[7]

It was against this situation that God's prophet Amos waxed wrathful. Amos attacked the economic exploitation of the poor (Amos 2:7; 5:11-12; 8:4-7), and the complacency that allowed it to exist (Amos 6:1).

There are many parallels with Amos' situation in rural Australia today. Of course, our situation is not as desperate and it is almost scandalous to focus on the troubles of Australian rural communities when there are so many worse situations in the world. However, injustices do occur here and we are called to minister where we are. We need to ask why it is that handicapped people in the city get free travel whilst the few grants that are available for rural handicapped people to travel to the city for treatment are so difficult to obtain in practice. We need to ask why (at the time of writing) there are no country based psychiatric services in South Australia. Why do our wheat farmers face unfair foreign wheat tariffs? Why do our farmers have to pay more for fuel than their American competitors? Why are transport and handling fees so exorbitant that our goods are uncompetitive the moment they leave the farm? Why are banks so unaccountable for their treatment of farmers? Why is everyone profiting from farm goods except the farmer? Why have most politicians only given lip service to the needs of rural communities? And so it goes on.

God condemns complacency. The church particularly must care about the plight of the rural community and seek justice for it.

An article written in the South Australian newspaper *"The Advertiser*" (February 6th, 1995) suggested that a twenty-cent increase in the price of a loaf of bread was validated by "the drought." Pastor John Main, of the "Churches of Christ" in South Australia wrote to the Advertiser pointing out that the entire cost for the farmer of ALL the wheat in a loaf was about ten cents. He therefore suggested that if bakers need to raise their prices, they should do so honestly and not put the blame on rural people.

The church is particularly seen as an advocate for justice when it is addressing local issues. Rural people are not impressed by bulk mail-outs inviting them to come to city conferences on sexual equality or land rights. If the church isn't seen to be involved with justice locally, then it is given no credence at all.

The responsibility of church to be both justice "watchdog" and advocate locally was highlighted to me by an experience that happened early in my ministry.

It occurred during a time of rural recession when the banks were tightening up their lending parameters. A bank told a local share farmer that he would not be advanced the money to buy seed and fertiliser to grow his crop. Despite never failing to pay the interest on his loan, the bank considered him to be a bad risk. Although the bank's decision was regrettable, it was understandable.

It should have been the death blow to the share farmer but he was resourceful enough to secure a private loan from a friend The farmer asked whether he could place this loan in his bank. The local bank manager said it would be fine and that the bank would not touch it. However, after he deposited the money, the bank's Head Office staff overruled the local manager and took all of the money to pay off the principal of the farmer's outstanding loan. The farmer

was ruined and his friend who had provided the loan had lost her money. Pleas from the farmer and the local manager to Head Office fell on deaf ears.

I became aware of the situation by chance. After checking the facts with the local bank manager, I asked who the decision-maker was at Head Office and wrote him a letter. The bank realised that as a minister of the church, I had the capacity to go public and cause them some embarrassment. With some ill grace, the bank released the farmer's money and he used it to grow crops that went on to win some of the top prizes at the Royal Adelaide show that year.

It is when the church is involved with the community and is known to be an advocate for justice locally that it is seen to be an asset, an ally of the people.

There are many ways in which the church can be involved in local justice issues. Ministers who are members of community organisations such as the community health council can exert significant influence. As a minister, I have been approached to join with the local doctor to do a medical demographic survey so we can write a joint paper to support a submission for the provision of various medical services.

Note that I have stressed the role of "minister" rather than church member. This is deliberate. Many of the services in a rural town are held together by volunteers, many of whom are church-goers. This is not seen to be anything special. It is only when the minister is involved in a project that the town perceives the church to be particularly supporting it. It is sad but true. Hopefully, this attitude will change with time.

In seeking justice for rural Australia, the church needs to look carefully at itself. The church has not been perceived by some country people as being very supportive of them because of its backing for native land titles which may threaten the livelihood of some farmers. It is a vexing dilemma. Anger has also come about as

a result of denominational organisations closing down local churches or because they have failed to find people prepared to minister in the country. The church must cry out to civil authorities that the worth of rural Australia is more than economic. However, it must also show this to be true in its own ministry.

The value of land, beyond its economic worth, was beautifully portrayed by my friend Pastor John Main in his 1994 address to Churches of Christ Rural Issues Task Group. This is what he said:

> *I am writing about a feeling, something which is deep inside a person, about a belonging... I think that it can be equated with the call of the sea for a sailor expressed by John Masefield:*
>
> "I must go down to the sea again,
> To the lonely sea and the sky
> And all I ask is a tall ship
> And a star to steer her by..."
>
> *The land, for peoples around the world, has an ethos of belonging, security and integrity about it, which, for many, gives them meaning...*
>
> *We acknowledge the identity of Aboriginal people with the land. There is much taking place to ensure that this people's link with the land is being preserved. A problem with this is that our society has made land into a commodity rather than an identity. You get wealth from a commodity, meaning from the land. To the European land is something commercial; to the Aborigine it is spiritual.*
>
> *I sense that we haven't entirely lost that in our culture. The "great Australian dream" is still to own your own home. ...It is a place of belonging, security and identity.*
>
> *It is the farmer who knows what I am talking about. I cannot begin to write what he or she experiences in relationship with the land any more than we whites can identify with the*

Aborigine who longs to be back in full relationship with the land. When a farmer is adjudged as non-viable, no longer worth the continued support of the bank or Government agencies; that is a commercial evaluation. It might be right with that criterion but it does nothing at all to acknowledge that the land is in the blood of this person and their family. I realise that for Aboriginal peoples it is centuries of belonging that is beginning to be acknowledged, but is it not possible that there is similar truth there for the farmers, the people of the land?

Twenty years or more ago I walked around an old farm with which my mother's family had had some identity for years. ...The old mud house was crumbling and around it were the sheds, the sheep yards and the wooden trough, hewn with an adze out of a solid log with goodness knows what effort and persistence which today we would value only by the cost of employing a person for the job. It was there, on that day, that something of the land, of my heritage stirred in me. To me, in memory, what happened was a spiritual thing. It tells me that there is an ethos of the land which calls for a different sort of consideration that that of viability.

(John Main, 1994)

MANAGING CHANGE

It is always tempting to look back to the "good old days" when the church existed in a Christian culture rather than the secular one we live in today. In those days, the role of the church seemed so much easier to define. We may even be tempted to try and recreate the church culture that served us so well in the past. To save us from this, it is necessary to examine briefly the "theology of new things."

God is a God of new things (Isaiah 43:19; Jeremiah 31:31). God has designed the universe such that nothing stays the same. Everything is in a continuous state of change. The problem, as pointed out by

Hugh Mackay in his book "*Reinventing Australia"*[8] is that the speed of technological and social change has recently become so rapid that many of us feel exhausted. Nonetheless, change is inevitable—even necessary. Our spiritual life can best described as a journey along which we continually develop. Whenever we allow our systems to ossify and get set in their ways, the spirit of God ranges against them to set us free and continue us on that journey. Change is part of life and should not be avoided. The status quo has never been a comfortable safe alternative because it had never existed.

From this, we conclude that just as the church in rural Australia is called to seek justice, it is also called to manage change.

One aspect of change that has become evident in many rural communities is that the number of people attending church has declined. Because of this, it is perhaps timely to discuss the "theology of sustainability."[9]

God has always valued the small and the "remnant." God is the God who promises to be where two or three are gathered together (Matthew 18:20). This challenges the claim that economics and power are the only factors that determine worth and validity. It justifies the legitimacy of a church of six people over and against economic models. In fact, small groups that meet in private homes are well placed to play a key role in the future direction of the rural church. Such groups can be adapted to target specific needs. They can be the means whereby a local church presence can be maintained in communities that simply cannot support the huge financial burden of a church building, manse and a full-time minister.

Small groups can allow the "remnant" to retain their identity, re-group and engage in local mission. It is a ministry style that has successfully grown churches for generations in areas where Christians have been in a minority. Some church organisations are now looking at the option of training local people to be "lay ministers" in their home areas. Such people would be well placed to

run these house fellowships that ensure that the spiritual heart of the community continues to be nurtured.

The attractive relational nature of small groups also makes them ideal entry points for people to come into the church body. In fact, I know of no church, however big, that has thrived without establishing small groups within its congregation. Their informal intimate atmosphere provides an excellent environment in which people can be discipled.

Many of the factors that make for the successful running of small groups in the city also apply in the country. Some, however, do not. What then, are those factors that need to be born in mind when seeking to grow rural churches through small groups?[10]

TIME

Small groups need to be sensitive to the agricultural year. It is unrealistic to ask farmers to come to a small group meeting during sowing and harvest. Farming is not a nine to five job. Farmers in the South East of South Australia sow in early winter and harvest in summer. The Uniting Church at Keith therefore decided to meet in blocks of time that missed the busy periods of the agricultural year. They met every week for six weeks twice a year. One of these series of evening meetings was held in a local tea and craft shop. The short duration of the courses meant that people did not have to commit themselves for very long and therefore were more inclined to attend.

One of the quiet times in the agricultural year may occur over Lent (as was the case at Keith). This is a time when many Church people already expect to be involved in Lenten studies. Lent is therefore a good time to introduce small groups as it allows you to begin where people already are.

The time available to attend meetings is becoming increasingly scarce in most rural communities. Depending on the rural economic climate, the number of people in rural areas is declining. Much of the work once done by a farmhand is now done by the farmer's family as they seek to contain costs. Many farmers' wives also have a second job. However, although rural communities are shrinking in size, the number of community organisations they support remains the same, (e.g. church, sporting groups, CWA, volunteer fire service, school canteen, service organisations etc.). This means that country people are committed to many organisations and time is at a premium. It is a wise minister who uses that time carefully. Flogging exhausted parishioners with guilt trips so that they join small groups does nothing for God's kingdom (Matthew 23:1-4). Christianity is about lifting burdens!

DISTANCE

Distance is another factor to bear in mind when starting small groups in rural areas. In times of economic recession, it becomes particularly important. It is not cheap to do a regular 60 km round trip to a house fellowship.

There are several mechanisms that can be employed to help. The first is to ensure that those meetings that are called are of high quality and are worth attending. It is also possible to use a trip for a number of purposes. Sundays can be put to good use by having meetings either before or after the church service. Similarly, a meeting can also be organised for waiting parents who have come in to town to bring their children to youth group.

Another strategy is to have groups that draw people together from a local geographical area. Mixed denominational groups can be a very effective way of gathering Christians together in an area that would not otherwise have enough people from one denomination to form a small group. An example of this exists at Goolgowi, a small country town in New South Wales, where families from Uniting Church,

Lutheran, Baptist and Salvation Army backgrounds meet together once a month for fellowship. They share a meal and sing together before the children go off for their special activity leaving the adults to share a Bible study.

If you still suspect that the travel budget is a bit tight for one family, it may be possible to meet at their home, (provided that they are not expected to bear the cost of entertaining everyone).

The isolation that can characterise many rural communities means that children will need to be catered for if both parents are being asked to attend a small group. Grandparents may not live five minutes away! Venues therefore need to be suitable for children, and there needs to be an enjoyable program that allows them to feel part of the group. Some groups meet together and sing prior to the children going off to another room for activities such as watching and discussing a Christian video.

Other solutions to the distance problem are more obvious, e.g. meet less often, or share transport. Many rural towns also make a community minibus available for approved public uses. It may be worth investigating its availability.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Social groups are well established in most rural communities and many of these groups tend to look inwards and think self-maintenance rather than reaching out. It is, however, possible to work within some of these groups in the church. For example, the Women's Fellowship may consist of elderly women who have cared for each other for many years. Splitting them up may well be counterproductive. It will almost certainly be resisted, so it may be better to encourage the Women's Fellowship to flourish as a small group in its own right and help it identify its own mission area.

Many of the natural groupings in the country, particularly for men, are centred on activity, (e.g. fire service, football, agricultural bureau, service clubs etc.). It may therefore be worth organising small groups for men that include an activity of some kind, e.g. carpet bowls, crafts or catering for a youth drop-in centre.

Groups that feature self-disclosure, reading out loud and the public airing of opinion may find it difficult to attract the rural male—at least initially. The reasons for this are difficult to determine. It may be due to a lack of confidence caused by a limited education or exposure to different social settings. Perhaps existing social mores have taught them not to be seen to have presumptions of authority or ability, (the tall poppy syndrome).

The reluctance of men to share may also be due to the natural private independence and reservedness engendered by a hard, isolated, self-sufficient rural life. This may be further enhanced by the competitive curse of testosterone that discourages men from making themselves vulnerable.

It should be remembered, however, that rural men do have highly developed opinions about almost everything and are not hesitant in expressing them to their peers in an environment they feel comfortable in. The aim of a church small group that seeks to reach men is therefore to create this safe environment.

It is important not to forget the itinerants in a country town who lack local kinship, as they can find it difficult to break into the tightly knit character of relationships that so effectively integrates the locals.[11] (These relationships are often highlighted by a funeral. A rural community "owns" its people and therefore owns their funeral. In consequence, country funerals can be very large). The itinerant population (e.g. doctors, teachers, bank workers and ministers), don't identify with the community in the same way as locals, so the setting up of small groups that develop and foster a sense of belonging may be entirely relevant for them. It may also be appropriate for some small groups to continue meeting together

during sowing and harvest, as many members of a country town are not farmers.

Nurture groups can be an effective means of integrating new residents with local people. Newcomers and itinerant people tend to be used but not integrated by small country churches. Small groups, which mix new and old, can break this pattern.

Some rural areas also have a mining industry or a meat-works. Where this occurs, the industry usually develops its own community and sense of identity. It is often wise for small groups to work within these existing social structures.

Farmers in a rural crisis risk losing their job, their identity, their pride, their house and their superannuation (which is normally the profit from selling the farm to the next generation). However, it should be remembered that farmers are not a homogeneous group. One community can have lucerne cropping, dairy cattle, cereals, market gardening and sheep. The vagaries of the market and the weather can mean that the fortunes of the different farming groups vary considerably. It may not be easy for people from different farming groups with different economic constraints to share deeply together. If this is likely to be a problem, make the small groups as homogeneous as possible so that members have a common interest and can relate to each other well.

A Rural Reflection

THE MALLEE TREE

The mallee is a tough old tree. The ones I walk amongst in the Mid Murray area can tell a tale or two of drought, fire and flood. Have you noticed, the old mallee tree always seems to be shedding its bark?

It seems that the mallee has to continually change its bark so that the tree can grow and repair itself. Because of this, it is able to adapt and cope with droughts, fires and floods.

The cost of coping with the present is its shedding of old skins.

The same is true for us. If our relationship with God does not progress and grow throughout the years - we might find it difficult to cope with the present. Are there old prejudices against God that you might have to give up to allow a growing friendship with God to continue?

Risk change ...and risk God.

---oOo---

OWNING THE FUTURE

The church is called to manage change precisely because the rural community is in a state of change. Church consultant, Bruce McKenzie, describes people in shrinking rural towns as variously being in a state of siege, alienation, grief, or complexity.[12]

One of the first lessons learnt by people offering pastoral care in situations where people have been neglected or taken advantage of, is to encourage them to take control of their situation. The same is true for suffering rural communities. It is not possible to return to the old days. Things are different now. It is better to view change as

an invitation to adapt rather than to see it as a steamroller clanking remorselessly on its destructive path. Change can be managed. It need not be debilitating and paralysing. Rather, it can be constructive and motivating. We either choose to manage change or we risk sharing the fate of the dinosaur.

One of the lessons we can learn from our Aboriginal friends in the struggle to recover their identity in Australia is that the clock cannot be put back. Whilst they have to seek justice for past wrongs, that in itself, is not enough. They also have to learn to thrive in today's very different environment. They too need to manage change.

The choice of working to ensure a future for a rural community presupposes that people wish the community to have a future. It presumes that people have something they wish to protect, something that is good. Consequently, one of the first things people can do when planning the future is to come together and express why they like living where they do. They need to tell their story and celebrate their identity in exactly the same way our Aboriginal friends are doing. From this will spring the will to live.

How then has the church of today coped with the changing face of rural ministry?

The classical method by which church denominations have coped with the decline in rural church attendance is to close churches down and amalgamate with neighbours. Sometimes this is the only way of divesting the church of huge buildings that can no longer be maintained. However, amalgamation does have its problems. It can cause enormous grief for the church that closes down and tremendous social problems for the church that they join with.

Members from disbanded small congregations often don't have the same commitment when giving financial support to large composite congregations. They can feel a loss of identity and ownership in a big church and this may result in some choosing not to attend it.[13]

The Uniting Church Presbytery of Mitchell in Victoria employed Bruce McKenzie, a church consultant, to explore demographic and social factors so that appropriate changes could be made to the ministry infrastructure in a depopulating rural area. The suggestions put forward were as follows:

1) To re-shape the Presbytery around four "Mission Areas" located in the four larger provincial cities of the Presbytery. (NB not all areas of Australia have large provincial cities.)
2) To maintain Sunday worship in the medium sized population centres but to establish house churches in the smaller population centres that meet during the week.
3) Fifty percent of clergy time to be devoted to maintaining a pastoral ministry in each local area. Thirty percent of their time to be devoted to specialist ministries in which their particular gifts could benefit the Mission Area. Ten percent of clergy time to be given to team planning and collegiate support, and the remaining ten percent of time given over to personal preparation and development.
4) To create a laity "ministry roll" in specific ministry areas which is supported and encouraged by appropriate training.
5) To appoint ministers and lay people within the Mission Centres to special ministries that is appropriate to their skill, experience and calling.[14]

This organisation allows congregations, however small, to maintain their identity, autonomy and esteem, even if they are only represented by a house church.

The proposed team ministry allows clergy to specialise and use their particular gifts more widely. It also encourages mutual support and backup.[15] However, team ministry can challenge the sense of ownership and identity clergy have for their local geographical area. This may threaten the identity and motivation of some clergy. It is perhaps an indictment of the church that the reputation of shared team ministries has often not been good. Education would therefore

be required to change attitudes and equip clergy for this new style of ministry.

A Rural Reflection

THE RAIN GAUGE—A SYMBOL OF HOPE

Out in the bush, a symbol of hope stands at the end of every farmer’s garden. It is the rain gauge.

Unless you've been brought up on the land, it's difficult to explain the rural communities utter dependency on rain. No sensible salesman goes to a country town to sell anything just before the rains break and sowing gets under way. People at that time are anxious and patience is short.

Then the rains come. The farmers hop into their beloved tractors with relief and their wives smile again at each other across the street.

The rain gauge. What will it tell you? Is it enough? Is it too much?

Country thinking is not like urban thinking. Country thinking is cyclical, it thinks in terms of recurring seasons. If a bad season occurs there remains a hope that next season will be better.

The rain gauge is a symbol of hope for country Australia.

But is hope in God just as uncertain as the rain?

Well, I wouldn't place my faith in God unless there was evidence that he existed and created me to have meaning. I wouldn't have faith in God who was unknowable. I wouldn't have faith in a God who didn't know what it was like to live life and experience its pain and grief. I wouldn't have faith in a God I couldn't relate to.

However, I do have faith. I have faith because the amazing order I see in the universe points me to a meaning. I have

faith because God does know what it's like to live a life of pain and grief and therefore is able to help me in my pain. God came to live amongst us as Jesus. I do have faith because in my heart of hearts I can experience the love of a God who has prepared an eternal future for me.

It's a real hope, and I hope you share it.

---oOo---

Another way of maintaining ministry in areas of rural decline is to take an ecumenical approach, where different denominations share facilities or combine together as a single congregation.[16] This happened in the mallee town of Ouyen in North West Victoria. It came about as a result of the Uniting church building being in sore need of major repair. This occurred at the same time as the Anglican Church couldn't find a minister who would take up residence in the town. Both churches agreed to combine together and so solve both problems. As a result, the "Central Mallee Co-operative Parish" was born on the 22nd of May, 1994.

If the ecumenical approach is difficult to generate in the upper echelons of church hierarchy, perhaps it can be given impetus at the grass roots level. It is probably true that most change in church organisation has come about as the result of a local initiative. The Ouyen example is one such case.

Up to that point, a local Anglican parish could, in special circumstances, have permission to receive Holy Communion from a Uniting Church minister. However, the local people of Ouyen pushed hard for the Uniting Church minister to be accepted by the Anglican diocese as being a fully licensed Anglican priest able to administer the sacraments. This was something quite different. Fortunately, their initiative resulted in a theological review that allowed just this to happen. As such, they have been responsible for the precedent that has now been set.

Of course, much inter-denominational co-operation can occur without requiring permission from denominational head quarters. One such example happens in Bordertown, South Australia where the Church of Christ run an excellent "Rock the Flock" youth fellowship once a fortnight to which the surrounding Uniting Church parishes send their children.

It needs to be said that many can find ecumenical ministry very threatening unless good communication and sensitivity to each other's traditions are maintained.

It has already been said that one of the keys to a positive future for rural ministry is the mobilisation and empowering of lay people within the church. This will release people to minister in the areas they are gifted in and will also encourage a diversity of ministry options.

Whilst there is a certain risk in placing church leadership in the hands of people who don't necessarily know the ecclesiastical rules, it can make for interesting new possibilities. The challenge for church organisations will be to supply enough support to protect our lay leadership from the worst pit-falls whilst allowing them enough flexibility to meet the needs of their particular community.

Let me give you two examples where this has begun to happen.

The Uniting Church at Elliston on the West coast of Eyre Peninsula in South Australia was too far from other worship centres to be part of a meaningful parish. Their Presbytery therefore allowed them to run as a single congregation without a parish in 1992. This congregation is now led by three lay people, one of whom has permission to conduct Holy Communion. Elliston also organise for a visiting minister or lay preacher to conduct a service at least once a month.

This church is also planning to overcome their geographic isolation by the use of technology. They already make use of video, as they watch a service recorded at an Adelaide church each month. However, they are now investigating having a video camera and monitor at both Elliston and a Port Lincoln church so that they can have an interactive Sunday service with each other. This will allow, for example, people from Elliston to do the Bible reading for both congregations. Someone from Port Lincoln could then respond and preach from the Bible readings, again, to both congregations simultaneously.

The other example comes from the small rural town of Bute in South Australia's Mid North. This is an interesting example of how a major church denomination (in this case, the Uniting Church) has empowered a local congregation to choose both its leaders and its ministry.

As part of a deliberate project in 1994, the Bute congregation was asked to nominate local people to be the leaders of their church. The congregation were then invited to vote. A successful leader needed to secure seventy five percent of the votes to gain acceptance. Eventually, nine people were elected and these became the church leaders. The Presbytery had asked the Bute church what ministry they thought it important and appropriate to conduct in their community. This led the congregation to review its collective ministry gifts. From this, they were able to decide what areas of ministry their church would engage in.

New innovations are always risky. Some will fail. Others will enable us to lay hold of the future. There will be no one right way for a rural church to operate. What all church organisations need, however, is the courage and flexibility to respond to the particular needs of a community in ways that are most appropriate.

RURAL COMMUNITY SUPPORT GROUPS AND ACTION GROUPS.

The church has more power than is often believed. Most ministers are well educated and articulate and are therefore well placed to be advocates for their community. As community leaders, they can play a key role in organising and presenting development plans and submissions to authorities.

It is important however, that they work from within the community and network with other local groups and organisations that exist. The very act of doing this will help promote relationships and community identity.

A feature of many country towns has been the emergence of the rural community support group or action group. These have come about as rural people have decided to fight for their survival in the face of dwindling services, finances and personnel.

A typical story is that of Tumby Bay, a small town on Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. Its townsfolk were stung into action by a newspaper article published about them entitled "A town waiting to die." The local churches and community groups got together and organised a pilot meeting which in turn organised a day long district public meeting in June, 1991, attended by 345 people. This meeting included a series of workshops after which people gathered for a combined plenary session to identify and place in order of priority their economic, governmental, and cultural visions for the future.

Much has been accomplished as a result of the "Target 2000" action group.[17] As well as achieving some of its goals, it has increased the morale, vision and activity of other existing community groups, e.g. tourist groups. However, "Target 2000" is now in danger of losing some of its initial momentum and mechanisms will need to be put in place to counter this.[18]

A key resource person in instigating and running “Target 2000” was the local Uniting Church minister, The Rev. Brian Robins, who had considerable experienced in working with volunteer groups. His initiatives at Tumby Bay point out a possible function for rural clergy in the future. It is a function that requires the church to engage with the community in determining with them what their future will be. Such an involvement also provides a platform for the church’s prophetic and educational ministry, e.g. sharing the hope of the gospel, seeking justice for the rural community and highlighting our environmental responsibilities.

The church has perhaps been tardy in its involvement in the environmental debate. However, it is possibly the single most important issue that will determine whether life, as we know it, will survive on planet earth. The church must therefore show responsible leadership on this issue.

One of the stated aims of “Target 2000” was to encourage “total environmental responsibility.” The energy generated by this initiative has enabled the local Land Care group to win a national award for a pilot project to monitor the effect on coastal plains of planting trees on the inland hills.

The rural church could take an even more visible role in tackling the environmental issue by running a series of sermons in which the local Land Care group are invited to talk of practical solutions to local environmental problems whilst the minister provides the ethical and theological undergirding. The church may also undertake some environmental projects of its own, e.g. re-cycling or tree planting.

A rural community is comprised of more than the church. Whilst it is appropriate that the church takes the initiative and facilitate action, it is only by networking with other community groups that true community action can be taken. This combined action may initially take the form of a series of public meetings at which those things which people feel define their town are identified. From this

it will be possible to consider those things that might be done in order to develop the community in ways it wishes to go.

Two things will help in this. Firstly, there needs to be an umbrella organisation to provide the infrastructure that will allow community debate, sharing, planning and action. This body needs to call the meetings and co-ordinate the different interest groups within the community. The adage "united we stand" is very true.

The second is the advisability of calling in a number of consultants or, as Lyle Shaller is fond of saying "possibility thinkers." One of these might be an agriculturalist, or an industrial expert. It may be people from a development bank who might consider a local financial venture. (This happened when the AMP bank worked with agriculturalists to open up the Ninety Mile Desert in South Australia. The bank financed research into trace elements that made the land productive). It might also be a person from the government import substitution program. This organisation identifies those products Australia imports and asks which of these might be made locally.

There is obviously a need to identify existing natural resources and economic possibilities. However, this may require the development of new skills. This highlights the importance of networking. For example, a regional interest in aquaculture may mean that the local TAFE college can run a course on yabbie farming.

It is important for rural towns to not only identify their economic potential but also to identify the quality of life they wish to have. There is a feeling that we have emerged from the greedy 80's only to learn that selfish consumerism is not fundamentally satisfying. We need each other and a place to belong. The small country towns of Morawa and Carnama in the Western Australian wheat belt have exploited this. Both towns had lost about a quarter of their population in the last 25 years. However, they resolved to survive and thrive. Their answer was to identify the quality of life they had to offer. They identified friendliness, clean air, a sense of belonging

to a community and a place where children could walk back home from the swimming pool without being escorted. The shires of both towns advertised these benefits and also offered free residential blocks of land. Fully serviced industrial blocks were also made available at minimal cost. This initiative has brought a flood of inquiries from all over Australia.[19]

The role of the church is therefore to be involved in these initiatives and to work with the community as they repack their identity and future. Christianity is fundamentally about relationships and so it is entirely appropriate that the church encourage those activities that promote them. We should be in the vanguard in organising community events such as trading fares that feature local craft and endeavour. Any activity that gives locals a chance to tell their story and affirm their identity is to be encouraged. The church can not only provide the energy for much of this but also give the community the spiritual and ethical basis for it.

LEADERSHIP

Rural communities resist rapid change. It is therefore wise, as a leader, to go gently. Farmers move house less often than their urban cousins. They also have physical ties with the land. Both of these factors mean that rural people usually identify with their area more closely than urban people. Their grandfather may have cleared the land for the farm. A 1979-1981 survey indicated that a third of the wheat-growers in southern Australia were living on land owned by a grandparent.[20] Such people know their story, their history and their identity. It is important for a minister to learn this story, to "sit where the people sit" (Ezekiel 3:15) and establish a loving relationship with them so that he or she will earn the right to speak into the lives of rural people to bring about those changes that are necessary to further the gospel. Unless this is done, the rural population will simply retreat and wait for the next minister.

This brings us to the subject of the length of time minister's stay in a settlement. Good leadership is probably the most vital factor that will determine the success of any long-term mission project. Because of this, a quick turnover of ministers, (not uncommon in the country), is unlikely to encourage their success.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that parish boundaries are usually an imposed division of people done for church administrative purposes. Country people have strong local loyalties that may not coincide with parish boundaries. Because of this, it is usually better to work at a congregational level when conducting ministry projects.

A lot of rural people are self-employed and lead fairly hard physical lives. They often have an independent spirit and pride that does not make them easily biddable. Of all the Australian populace, they come closest to fulfilling the myth of the caricatured Australian, i.e. taciturn, self-sufficient, proud, egalitarian, and suspicious of authority. Any form of coercing country people to participate in ministry projects should therefore be avoided.

A CONCLUDING STATEMENT

The metal of any faith is seen in tough times. Just as God came to us in troubled times to give us hope and meaning, we too have been called to follow the example of Jesus and go into our troubled world with the hope of the gospel.

God cares for rural Australia. If we can do nothing else other than sit with rural people in the pain of change and show God's love, we will have done much. However, ours is a creative God, a God of new beginnings. As such, new situations present opportunities for new possibilities. Our role is therefore to be faithful so that we are open to the new things to which God is calling us.

We are living in a time where a fundamental revolution in human consciousness is occurring. We are told we are now living in the post-modern age. It is an age in which we no longer believe in brute facts but interpreted facts; where reason has given way to mystery; the exact for the symbolic or metaphorical. The certainties of science have been humbled so that they now acknowledge mystery and faith. Our self-confidence has been chastened and our infatuation with technological progress has given way to a longing for identity, meaning and community. What was once written and universally applied now makes room for what is oral and locally particular.

This is the age in which we are called to be church.

One of the things it will mean is that the church will need to accommodate diversity. Single ministry styles, if they ever existed, are a thing of the past. The universally applied minister can no longer be universally applied. Church organisations now need to train people to run regional urban mega-churches of two thousand people, as well as to equip lay people to run tiny, rural, house fellowships of six people. The implications for theological training and institutional flexibility are huge.

It may well be that this age of change (or pace of change) will not always be with us. Now is, therefore, the time of opportunity. Those structures best able to adapt will, in true Darwinian style, be those most fit to claim the future. If we do not change, we will lose ground to the myriad of bizarre sects and beliefs thrown up by this age of change and uncertainty.

Another implication of living in a post-modern world is that there are no absolute boundaries between the disciplines of science, faith, health, psychology and sociology. This means that a minister seeking to address the problem of community morale will need to network with agriculturalists, industrialists, health workers and politicians. We can no longer hide in hermetically sealed vacuum packs uncontaminated by other disciplines. It may not be too much

of an exaggeration to suggest that the very survival of some rural communities will depend on whether people from all these disciplines can network together to plan the future.

Ours is an age of change and redefinition. We can't avoid it. It is upon us. We either recognise it and change to meet new needs, or we ignore it and become an anachronism, an irrelevance, a quaint historical throwback. We can change and are called to change because spiritual life resides in people rather than institutional organisations.

The fact that rural Australia is going through a period of rapid change is itself of theological significance. The reason is this. Our theology of mission and how we structure the church to meet that mission are both responses to the life experiences that surround us. The church takes these experiences and holds them against biblical and church traditions in order to distil its theology for mission and determine a structure that will allow it.

In a time of rapid change, people's life experiences change and new needs exist. This means that the rural church should be on the cutting edge in redefining the church's theology of mission and church structure. Far from being away from the action, the rural church should be leading the way in helping Christians uncover their mission in today's society.

Having made a case for the church to allow change and diversity, we need to ask if there is anything that should not be changed.

Whilst theologians may argue that the Christian gospel has undergone a continual process of change in the hands of the church, I would argue that the basics of Christian orthodoxy, as expressed by most major Christian denominations, would still find an "amen" from the apostles Peter and Paul. The basic principles outlined by the Bible have been the yardstick for the Christian church for some considerable time. It is no accident that spiritual renewal in the church throughout the ages is invariably attended by the return of a

fresh ardour for examining the principles distilled from an honest and holistic study of the New Testament. Whilst this is a gross oversimplification, I simply want to make the point that trouble invariably occurs when we seek to change the gospel but retain institutional church structure. It is my suggestion that we reverse this; that we change institutional church structure and leave the gospel unchanged.

In summary, let me say that the role of the church will always be a balance between the prophetic and the pastoral. If we were only to speak God's word and proclaim God's standards of holiness and justice, our ministry might become distant, judgemental and harsh. However, if we were only concerned with pastoral empathy, the faith we offer might be in danger of becoming woolly and devoid of any real guidance and hope. We would simply sit with people in their confusion and have little to offer in terms of real hope. We therefore need both. It is with this in mind that I have sought to focus particularly on the hope that is offered for rural ministry when we consider our prophetic role of managing justice, and our pastoral role of managing change.

Ours will be an imperfect world until such time as God makes all things new. Whilst we wait for this, God is working actively against pain, injustice and hopelessness, particularly through the agent of his church—us. This is why the church is called to minister in rural areas. It was the reason I ministered there.

I felt it to be an honourable calling.

NOTES

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1) What has particularly impacted you from reading this chapter?
2) What questions arise from reading the chapter?
3) What does your understanding of God lead you to conclude about God's attitude to rural communities?
4) Would you have ridden the motorbike into the church (assuming you could)? If so: why? If not: why?
5) What do you think of Bruce McKenzie's recommendations (in the section "Owning the Future")?
6) What do you need to do in order to research the needs of a country town and to plan strategically about how to bring spiritual, mental, financial and physical wellbeing to a rural community?

END NOTES

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3) *Ibid.* p.63.
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11) Kelly.

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16) A boarding house master of one such school in Sydney also lauded the qualities of rural children, speaking of their practical skills and loyalty. He described them as “the salt of the earth.” (Personal communication)

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11) Kellehear, p.5.

12) Moorhead, p.533.

13) Reported in the South Australian newspaper *The Advertiser*, 19th August, 1994, p.3.

14) *Rural Health and Specialist Medical Services* 1994 report.

15) Kellehear, p.5.

16) "*Evaluation of the Skills and Requirements of Rural Human Service Organisations*" (Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, Sept. 1993) p.27. Evidence to support this claim came from: Coolahan, L. *Patterns of Suicide and Attempted Suicide in the South Eastern Region of NSW*, (Department of Health, South Eastern Region, 1991).

17) Susan Oliver interviewed on ABC "Radio National", 24th July, 1992. Some of her facts she quoted came from: Eckersley, R. *Apocalypse No!* Essay series No.1 "Youth and the Challenge to Change" (Australia's Commission for the Future) July 1992.

18) Eckersley, R. *Apocalypse No!* Essay series No.1 "Youth and the Challenge to Change" (Australia's Commission for the Future) July 1992, p.3.

19) Dempsey K. "Research in a Country Town: Why Bother?" *La Trobe University Record* July, 1983 pp.6-7,12.

20) Eckersley, p.14.

21) "Schooling in Rural Australia", Commonwealth of Australia, 1988, p.5.

22) Longworth, J.W. and Riethmuller, P.C. "Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff: Exploding Some Myths About the Rural Sector in Australia", pp.13-21 in the *Current Affairs Bulletin,* June, 1993.

23) Austin, N. "Country, fed up and forgotten" in *The Advertiser,* South Australia, Dec 6th, 1993, p.19.

CHAPTER 6)

1) Kosuke Koyama addressed the World Convention of "Churches of Christ" in Adelaide, 1970

2) *"A Response to Drought"* Lifeline, Darling Downs and South West Queensland. A report of the activities of Lifeline's Rural Support Unit, Oct 1991 - June 1992.

3) *Ibid*

4) "*Stress: Getting Through Hard Times*", funded by Dalby Cotton Classic Committee, 1993. (Adapted from a leaflet compiled and co-ordinated by Jan Adcock and members of Women in Agriculture, Victorian Mallee Group by staff of Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Queensland, and Dalby and Jandowae Health Service).

5) This sermon is appended to the booklet "Responding to the Drought" written by the NSW Uniting Church Rural Ministry Unit, 1994.

6) David Sloane in *Ruminations* (a journal of the Uniting Church NSW Rural Ministry Unit), Dec 1994.

7) Wittenberg, G.H. "Amos 6:1-7: "They dismiss the day of disaster but you bring near the rule of violence" Exegetical Note *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 58, pp.57-69.

8) Mackay, H. *Reinventing Australia* (Angus and Robinson, 1993).

9) I am indebted to Bruce McKenzie (Church consultant with the Uniting Church) for first introducing me to the two phrases "management of change" and "theology of sustainability."

10) I am greatly indebted to the elders of the Uniting Church parish of Keith-Tintinara for their input and wisdom in helping to define some of these factors.

11) Dempsey, K. *Smalltown: A Study of Social Inequality, Cohesion and Belonging* (Oxford University Press, 1990) p.84.

12) McKenzie, B. Unpublished data.

13) Vidler, L. *"Changing a Doubtful Future in South Western Victoria"*, a report of the Mitchell Presbytery Rural Ministry Task Group which summarises the 1990 findings of the consultant Bruce McKenzie who was employed to explore options for future ministry in Mitchell Presbytery, (Uniting Church in Australia, Victorian Synod).

14) *Ibid.*

15) *Ibid.*

16) *Ibid.*

17) The Tumby Bay District Community Support and Action Group "*Target 2000*" Report, Feb, 1993.

18) Personal communication with the local Uniting Church minister, The Rev. Brian Robins.

19) Cribb, J. "Farewell to the Heartland" pp.10-16 in *The Australian Magazine* February 12-13, 1994.

20) Nalson, J.S. and Craig, R.A. "Rural Australia" pp. 311-343 in *Selected Readings in Australian Society* (eds.) S. Encel and M. Berry, (Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1987).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Nick Hawkes has two degrees in science and two in theology. He is the author of many books including *A Summary of the Bible* and *The Bible on the Key Issues of Life*. He was a research scientist for twelve years before training as a pastor.

Nick is a guest lecturer at two theological colleges and gives the daily devotions on Christian radio (1079*Life FM* and *Vision Radio*).

For more information, go to: www.nickhawkes.net