



NCLS Occasional Paper 9

The Christian Faith in Rural Australia

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Introduction

The proportions of Australians identifying themselves as Christian is in decline. But is there much difference between the capital cities and outside the capital cities? Are the rural areas the heartland for the Christian faith, or are they too in decline? There are many rural churches struggling, but is this because of declining populations and a lack of ordained clergy, or are other factors having an impact? Analysis of the 2006 Census data and the 2006 National Church Life Survey throws some light on the trends across the nation.

The Christian Research Association and NCLS Research are collaborating to examine the situation of rural churches in Australia and to provide relevant resources in the area of Rural Ministry. This paper has been produced as part of this cooperative venture.

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The Christian Research Association was formed in 1985 to serve the churches of Australia. Its task is to provide up-to-date and reliable information about religious faith and church life in Australia.

NCLS Research

NCLS Research is a joint project of ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The National Church Life Survey has been carried out on four occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006. Twenty-two denominations participated in the 2006 NCLS.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| The Rural Population..... | 5 |
| The Locality of Rural Churches..... | 5 |
| Identity with the Christian Faith..... | 6 |
| Growth and Decline in Christian Identification | 7 |
| Change in the Age Profile | 9 |
| Churches in Rural Areas | 11 |
| The Community Challenge | 12 |
| Rural Initiatives | 14 |

Tables & Figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 1: Locality of rural congregations by church size..... | 6 |
| Figure 1: Percentage of Australian Population Identifying with a Christian denomination by State within Capital Cities and in Non-metropolitan Areas | 7 |
| Figure 2: Percentage Change 1996-2006 in the Numbers Identifying with Christian Denomination by State within Capital Cities and in Non-metropolitan Areas..... | 8 |
| Figure3: Age Profile of Australians Identifying with a Christian Denomination outside the Capital Cities 1996 & 2006 | 9 |
| Figure 4: Percentage Decline Between 1996 & 2006 in Proportion of Population identifying as Christian by Age Group in Capital Cities and Outside the Capital Cities | 10 |
| Table 2: Rural Churches Leadership Makeup | 11 |
| Table 3: Leadership Changes in Rural Churches in past 5 years | 12 |
| Table 4: Collaboration with other Denominations..... | 14 |

The Rural Population

In 1901, only 37 per cent of Australia's population lived in the capital cities. By 1947, this had risen to just over half the population (51%). Now, 64 per cent of Australia's population live in its capital cities and only 36 per cent live outside of them.

Apart from the capital cities, there are ten major cities in Australia with a population of more than 100,000 people. Another 2.3 million people live in these cities: 11 per cent of the total population. This means that 25 per cent of the population live in a regional city or town of less than 100,000 people or in a rural area.

Between 1996 and 2006, the Australian population grew by 11.8 per cent. However, the growth was greater in the capital cities than outside the capital cities: 13.3 per cent compared with 10.2 per cent. In other words, the areas outside the capital cities are not all declining in population. The non-metropolitan cities are growing, as are the holiday and retirement areas, especially along the coast. The mining areas are also growing. The areas declining in population are primarily the farming areas.

Even in the farming areas, the picture is mixed. In some areas, farms are being amalgamated and fewer people are working them. In other areas, new farming projects have been initiated, different crops are being grown, or more intensive farming is taking place. Take an area like Pinaroo, for example, in the Mallee on the border between South Australia and Victoria. The population has been relatively stable here for some years despite the increasing size of the grain growing properties because of the advent of potato farming using underground water. Potato farming is a much more intensive employer than grain growing.

The Locality of Rural Churches

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is undertaken in Australia every five years. As part of the NCLS, representatives from 4467 local churches completed a NCLS Operations Survey, in which they indicated if they were in a rural context. In this sample, 9% of churches are in a rural area (less than 200 people), 16% are in a small rural town (200 to 2000 people), 13% are in a rural service centre (2000 to 10,000) and 6% in a rural city (10,000 to 20,000). These churches comprise 44% of all churches that completed the NCLS Operations Survey and form the basis of an initial NCLS study of rural churches. (The remaining 56% of churches were in regional cities or capital cities). See Table 1 for an overview of the sample of rural churches, by church size.

Table 1: Locality of rural congregations by church size

| Table 1 - Locality of rural congregations by church size | | | | | | |
|--|----------|--------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| | | Rural area (< 200) | Small rural town (200-2,000) | Rural service centre (2,000-10,000) | Rural City (10,000-20,000) | All Localities |
| Church Size Categories (regular attenders) | Up to 25 | 16% | 21% | 6% | 1% | 44% |
| | 26-50 | 2% | 9% | 10% | 3% | 23% |
| | 51-75 | 1% | 3% | 5% | 2% | 11% |
| | 76-100 | 0% | 2% | 4% | 2% | 8% |
| | 101-150 | 0% | 1% | 3% | 2% | 7% |
| | 151+ | 0% | 1% | 3% | 3% | 7% |
| All Size Categories | | 19% | 37% | 30% | 14% | 100% |

Source: NCLS 2006 Operations Survey (Rural congregations)

Identity with the Christian Faith

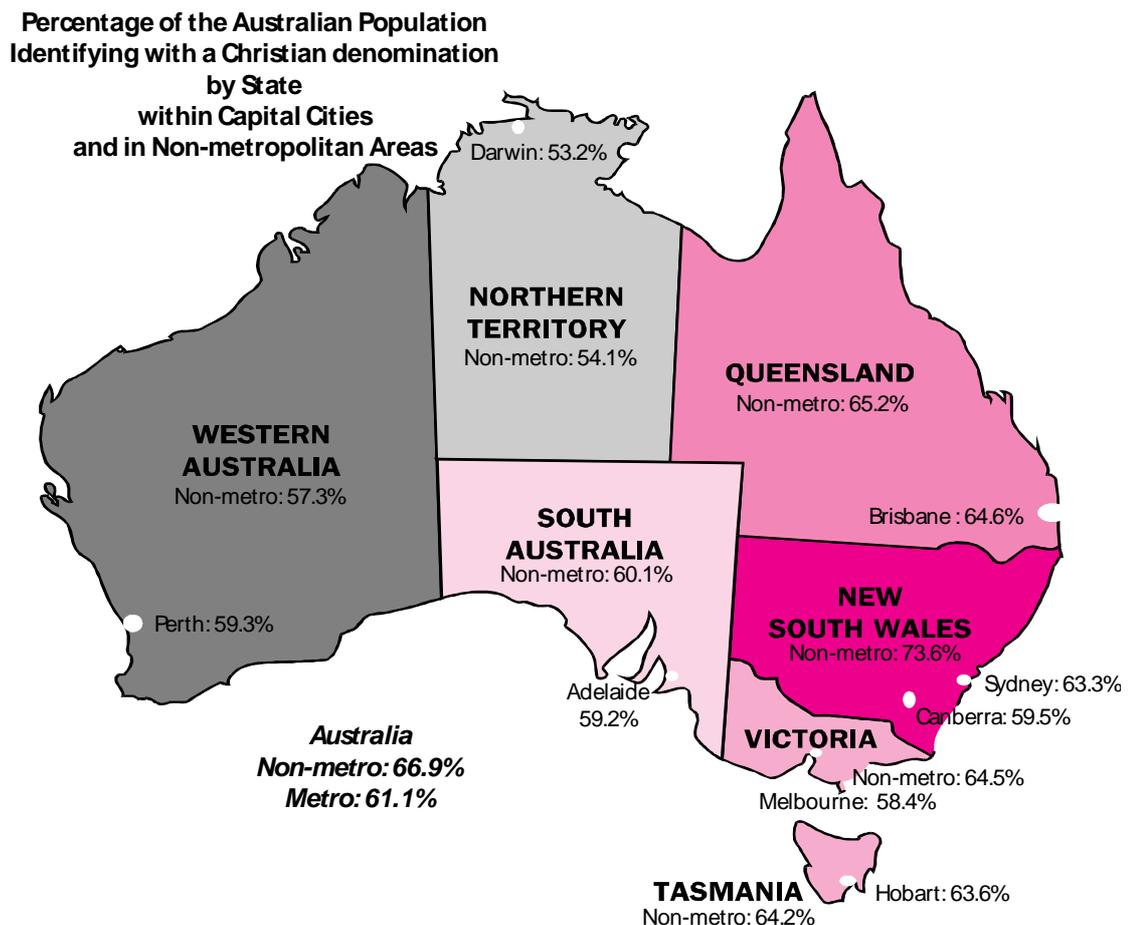
It is interesting to note that the strength of identification with the Christian faith around the capital cities does not vary hugely. In most capital cities, around 59 per cent identify with a Christian denomination. Hobart, Sydney and Brisbane are just a little higher than other capital cities with around 64 per cent identifying as Christian, and Darwin is lower on 53 per cent.

There is a little more variation in the rural areas. Non-metropolitan New South Wales has by far the highest level of identification with 74 per cent. In Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania, the proportions are around 65 per cent. However, in South Australia it is lower: 60 per cent. Western Australia (57 per cent) and Northern Territory (54 per cent) are lower again.

Overall, the non-metropolitan areas have a higher level of Christian identification than do the capital cities: 67 per cent to 61 per cent. But this hides considerable differences from one state to another. Non-metropolitan New South Wales has a much higher level of identification with the Christian faith than does Sydney: a difference of about 10 per cent. In Victoria, there is also a significant difference: around 6 per cent. But in the other States and Territories, the differences are small: just 1 per cent or so. The exception to the pattern is Western Australia where Perth has a higher level of identification with the Christian faith than does non-metropolitan Western Australia.

One of the differences has to do with farming and mining areas. While the wheat and sheep areas tend to have higher levels of Christian identification, the proportions are much lower in the mining areas. For example, in the mining town of Roxby Downs in South Australia, 48 per cent identify with the Christian faith, compared with 70 per cent on the lower Eyre Peninsula where grain production predominates.

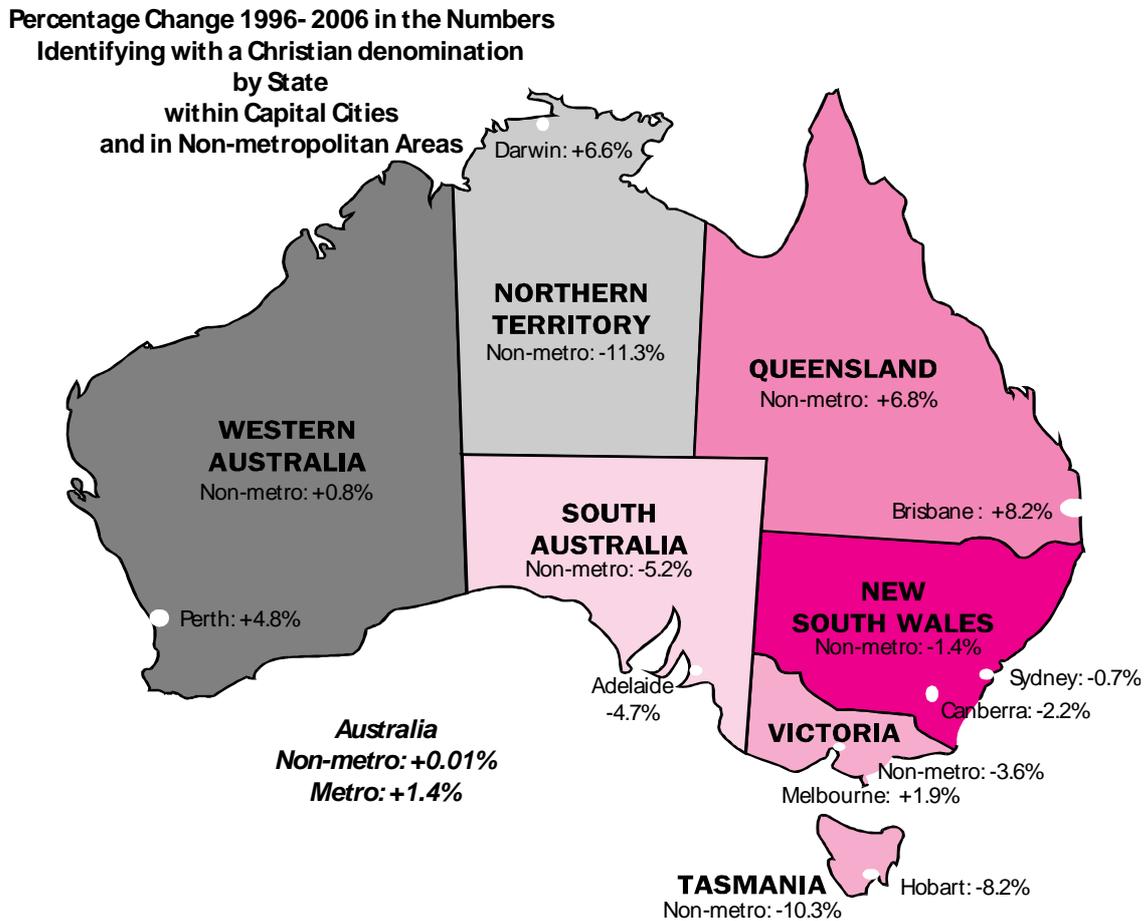
Figure 1: Percentage of Australian Population Identifying with a Christian denomination by State within Capital Cities and in Non-metropolitan Areas



Growth and Decline in Christian Identification

The accompanying map shows the change between 1996 and 2006 in the number of people identifying themselves as a Christian in the capital cities and in the non-metropolitan areas. Overall, the number identifying themselves as Christian in the capital cities rose by 1.4 per cent over that ten year period, while the numbers identifying themselves as Christian in the non-metropolitan areas remained virtually static.

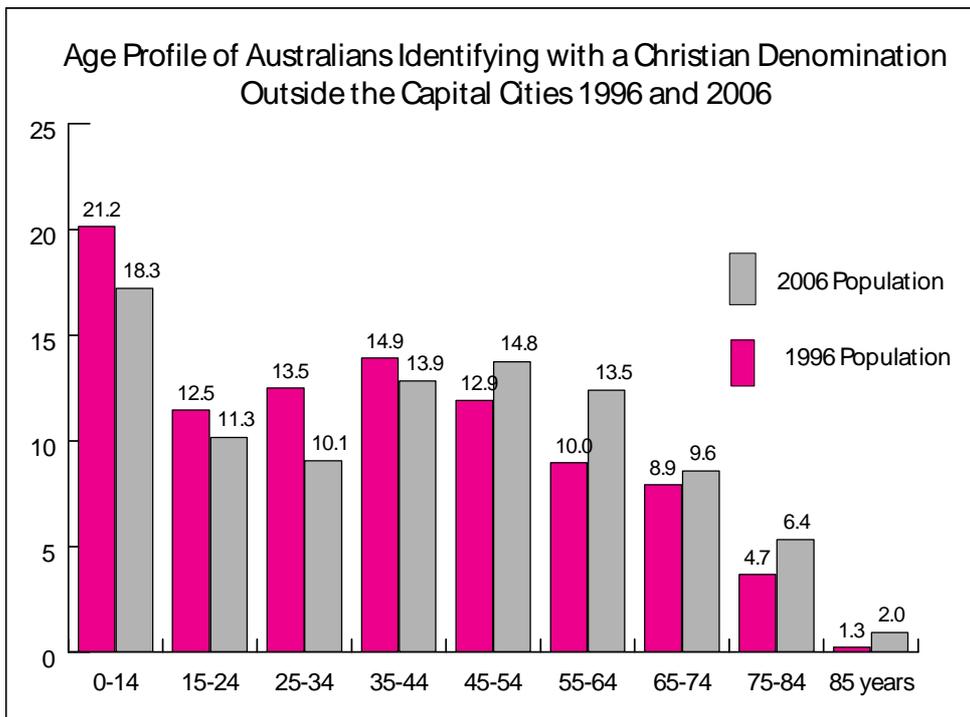
Figure 2: Percentage Change 1996-2006 in the Numbers Identifying with Christian Denomination by State within Capital Cities and in Non-metropolitan Areas



However, the picture was quite different from one part of Australia to another. The largest declines were in non-metropolitan Northern Territory - although Darwin was quite a different picture - and in Tasmania. South Australia saw substantial decline in the number of Christians while Western Australia grew. New South Wales experienced small declines. Melbourne, on the other hand, saw growth while other parts of Victoria saw decline. In Queensland, there was substantial growth in the number of Christians.

The picture has a lot to do with the change in population of each of these areas. Where the population grew strongly, such as in Queensland, so did the number of Christians, although not as rapidly as did the population. In Tasmania, the population numbers remained virtually static and the the numbers of Christians fell. Indeed, when one takes into account the change in population numbers, the decline in Christians as a percentage of the population in each State and Territory is quite consistent. In almost all parts of the country, the proportion of people, as distinct from the actual numbers, identifying themselves as Christian fell by 7 per cent between 1996 and 2006. In the non-metropolitan areas, the fall was 6.8 per cent compared with 7.2 per cent in the capital cities.

Figure3: Age Profile of Australians Identifying with a Christian Denomination outside the Capital Cities 1996 & 2006



NCLS Research is in the process of preparing estimates of church attendance across all denominations. During 2008 this data will be analysed for rural and urban patterns.

Change in the Age Profile

Figure 3 shows how the profile of those who identify as Christians has changed over the last ten years in rural areas. In all age groups under 45, there has been a decline, particularly in the 25 to 34 age group. In all age groups over 45 there has been an increase, particularly in the 55 to 64 age group.

Part of the change has to do with the changing age profile of the population in non-metropolitan areas. The numbers of young children declined slightly between 1996 and 2006. The numbers of young people aged between 25 and 34 declined even more sharply: by 10 per cent in the decade. On the other hand, there was a huge increase of 68 per cent in the numbers of people aged 75 to 84 living in non-metropolitan areas, and a significant increase of 42 per cent in the age group 65 to 74.

Young people are continuing to move out of rural areas for post-secondary education and employment. Many are reluctant to return to the rural areas, often because of the lack of employment opportunities there. On the other hand, some of the city people move to rural areas, particularly to the sea-side areas, when they retire. Older people who have always lived in the rural areas may move to the large regional cities where there are more facilities. But few move into the capital cities.

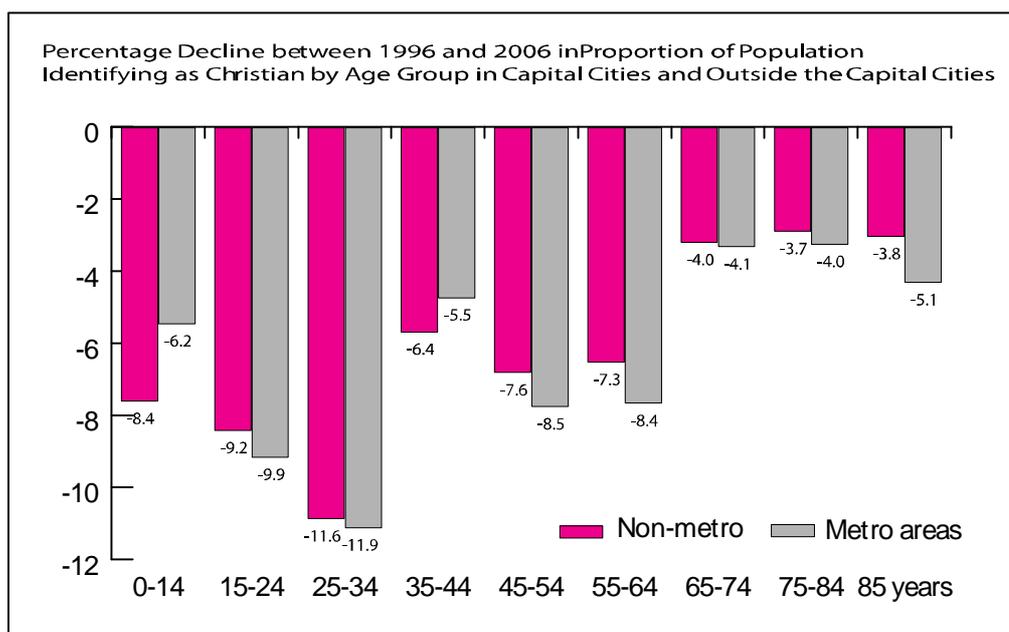
It should be noted that in some rural areas, particularly the more remote areas, there is different trend among Aboriginal people. Young Aboriginal children are not moving away from rural areas.

The more general change in the age profile of the non-metropolitan communities explains much of the change that is occurring in the age profile of those who identify themselves as Christians. But these population changes do not explain it all, as can be seen when we look at the proportional change rather than the change in actual numbers. Of people in each age group in the non-metropolitan areas, as in the capital cities, there has been a decline in the proportions identifying themselves as Christian. That decline has been particularly great among those under the age of 64 and particularly those in the 15 to 34 age group. The decline has been greater in the non-metropolitan areas among those in the 35 to 44 year age group and among their children who are mostly under the age of 15. In most other age groups, the proportional loss has been a little greater in the metropolitan areas than in the non-metropolitan areas.

The decline in young people between 15 and 34 is often part of a two-stage withdrawal from the Christian faith. While many of their grandparents continue to attend church, their parents have ceased to attend, but continue to identify. As the children come to an age at which they make up their own minds what is put on the Census forms, they are deciding that it is not meaningful to continue the identification.

However, as Figure 4 shows, people of all age groups, including older age groups, are ceasing to identify with the Christian faith both in the capital cities and in the non-metropolitan areas.

Figure 4: Percentage Decline Between 1996 & 2006 in Proportion of Population identifying as Christian by Age Group in Capital Cities and Outside the Capital Cities



Churches in Rural Areas

Anglican and Protestant rural respondents to the NCLS Operations Survey describe the leadership of their congregations in the following way:

Table 2: Rural Churches Leadership Makeup

| Table 2: Rural churches leadership makeup | % |
|---|----|
| Single ordained leader (priest, pastor, minister) | 50 |
| Single lay or non-ordained leader | 6 |
| Team of ordained leaders | 6 |
| Team including both ordained and lay leaders | 29 |
| Team of lay leaders | 9 |

Source: NCLS 2006 Operations Survey (Rural Anglican/Protestant congregations)

Note - Operations Surveys for Catholic parishes did not include this question.

Often there is a minister or priest attached to the church, but that person usually has several churches under his or her care. In just under half of all rural churches (45%) in the NCLS study, the leader or team of leaders were responsible for three or more congregations. A further 20% were responsible for two congregations. Only around a third (35%) of rural churches had leaders who are only responsible for a single congregation.

This means that for many church leaders, when they get to the church on a Sunday, they are often in a hurry to move onto the next service, perhaps many kilometres away. They can rarely get to the town for pastoral care or for other reasons because they are stretched so thinly.

Increasingly, the lay people themselves are taking responsibility for the religious life of their communities. They are determined to keep the church open, to maintain worship, and to provide care for the members of the community. In many places, the leading lay people are in their 60s, or sometimes still with substantial employment commitments, as well as commitments to their family members, older and younger. These people are often stretched.

In the NCLS study of rural churches, respondents were asked if the congregation had experienced any of a series of leadership changes in the previous five years. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 3: Leadership Changes in Rural Churches in past 5 years

| Table 3 - Leadership Changes in Rural Churches in past 5 years | |
|--|-----|
| Full-time leader to part-time leader | 18% |
| Part-time leader to full-time leader | 10% |
| Ordained leader to lay or team leadership | 14% |
| Lay leader to ordained leader | 10% |
| Increase in leadership team | 25% |
| Decrease in leadership team | 11% |
| Own leader to sharing with another congregation | 8% |
| Shared leader to own leader | 3% |
| <i>None of the above indicated</i> | 37% |

Source: NCLS 2006 Operations Survey (Rural congregations)

*Notes:

1 Respondents could pick more than one option, so figures may not add to 100%

2 Final option on table has been deduced from non-responses

The greatest change is that 25% of rural churches have increased the size of their leadership team. This could represent the increase of lay involvement, however these and other trends deserve closer scrutiny. While there have been movement in each direction, the net effect of changes has been:

- more have moved from having full-time to part-time leaders
- more lay or team ministry
- more have increased the numbers in their leadership team
- more sharing leader with another congregation

In many places, regional rural churches are emerging, not only or necessarily in the larger rural centres, which are catering for younger people (under the age of 60). People travel to these larger, more lively and family-oriented churches great distances. Young adults will also travel, sometimes driving a few hours round trip to attend events. So, models for regional young adults ministry is also being explored. The older people, however, keep hoping that the younger people will return to their own churches in each individual town.

The Community Challenge

One of the challenges across Australia in rural communities is the weather. Many areas are experiencing substantial drought. While the 2007 season began with some very optimistic signs for many people, the situation deteriorated through the winter months. In most places, the spring rains did not arrive and harvests have been poor.

Some farmers have enough of a crop to survive another year, particular given the higher prices that many crops are bringing. Others have enough resources to bear the brunt of another poor season. But other farmers are in dire straights. Farmers dependent on irrigation are seeing their fruit trees and vines die and know that they will not be able to gather another crop for many years until new trees and vines have grown. Farmers who made contracts to sell their crops are finding themselves caught without the crops to fulfil their contracts.

In many parts of rural Australia, farmers are asking whether this is just another drought year in a long string, or is this part of climate change? Are these changes permanent? Can they continue to farm the land that had been farmed for several generations? Must they change the type of farming that they do here?

It is not only the farmers who are asking the questions. The people in the rural towns are also asking what the future holds for them. They are well aware that rural incomes are poor. Farmers cannot afford to buy new machinery or goods for their homes or clothes for their children. Can the retailers maintain their businesses? The biggest question is 'how long?'. ABARE has indicated that in towns of populations of less than 3000, some 75% rely on income from rural activities. Larger towns have diversified income sources.

In a grain-growing area, the lay leaders of a local church went round the properties in the area. At each property, they prayed with the owners. They prayed for rain and for a successful harvest. Packets of seed lie at the foot of the cross in that church. But the questions remain. What does the future hold? What hope does their faith offer? What care can the churches provide?

In the Mallee in Victoria, a very active and innovative farmers' cooperative have been conducting a study of the effect of the drought on the people living on the land. A selection of farming families were visited early in the year. Recently the interviewers returned to them for a second time to see how they were faring. But the interviewers have been finding the process tough. They have found themselves in deep counselling situations and have been almost overwhelmed by the situation themselves.

With very few ministers and priests in the rural areas, some rural Councils have been talking about employing their own 'Council chaplains' to provide some measure of care for the families in the areas. They are looking for people who can provide pastoral care, who can befriend people. There are advantages in having someone come in from outside. The outsiders are not usually part of the network of families of the local area. They can maintain confidentiality. They are professionals. Yet, it is less threatening for some to speak with a minister than to speak with a mental health professional, for example.

Other equally significant challenges across rural communities include the maintenance of community infrastructure as well as the changes in rural agriculture as it adjusts to climate change realities and the pressures of global economics.

Rural Initiatives

This is a time when the denominational bodies need to take some initiatives in rural areas. Most rural congregations have few resources themselves and certainly not sufficient to take substantial initiatives on their own. The challenges they face in the drought, or, in some places the floods and storms, are very large. The challenges that they face in providing care and in helping people in the spiritual dimensions of their lives are enormous.

There are many little experiments going on, often as much out of necessity as out of design. Local urban churches are offering some form of partnership with rural churches. In some places, the minister from the urban church has gone to the rural church to assist the local rural minister, perhaps taking services so that the local rural minister can spend more time on pastoral matters.

In facing local issues, the barriers between denominations are falling away. In some places, churches of different denominational backgrounds are developing covenants with each other. They are finding new strength as they worship together. We recently visited a community where the Lutheran and Uniting Churches have covenanted to act as one church. The local Council executives told us how delighted they were with the arrangement. They felt they could more easily work with the church in the town. They were always afraid that by working with one church, they would alienate others.

The NCLS study of rural churches explored the degree of ecumenical collaboration. (See Table 4). When we identify those who collaborate at least yearly with congregations of other denominations on activities, we find around three-quarters collaborate for services of worship or special celebrations such as Christmas or Easter. Some 61% collaborate for welfare and community service activities. Around a third collaborate at least yearly on evangelistic or educational activities.

The pattern is reversed for more regular involvement. Collaboration on a weekly or more often basis is most common with education and welfare/community services based activities, ie. activities low on religious content.

Table 4: Collaboration with other Denominations

| Table 4 - Collaboration with other denominations | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------|
| | Weekly or more often | Monthly or more often | Yearly or more often | Never |
| Church services | 2% | 10% | 60% | 28% |
| Christmas, Easter, etc | 0% | 2% | 73% | 25% |
| Welfare/ community service | 4% | 7% | 30% | 59% |
| Evangelistic activities | 1% | 3% | 29% | 67% |
| Educational activities | 8% | 4% | 18% | 70% |

Source: NCLS 2006 Operations Survey (Rural congregations)

Some rural churches have worked closely with their denominational aid agencies, establishing local initiatives to meet the needs. One rural Uniting Church in Victoria has recently established a drop-in centre to provide opportunities for counselling. It runs men's breakfasts with inspirational speakers, not only to revive people's spirits but also to create community. It has paid for some expensive text books needed by students in the local school.

While lots of small initiatives are occurring, this is a time for the denominations and their aid agencies to work ecumenically for some larger-scale initiatives. While the problems are appearing at different places at different times, the fact that there are likely to be on-going changes in climate, agriculture practice and more frequent droughts and floods, means that some longer-term initiatives are needed.

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