

SOME THOUGHTS ON RURAL CHURCH NZ

The history of rural churches is as old as European settlement in NZ. Churches were planted where people settled. Some settlements grew and many did not for a wide variety of reasons ranging from geographical forces through to mechanisation and modernisation. The legacy was some churches grew with the population growth while others either remained small or in some cases became isolated from resident populations.

This became exacerbated in the 1960's onwards due to the urban drift and government policies such as think big (1970's) and user pays (1980's) etc. These policies led to the centralisation of services (services removed from district – post offices, doctors, hospitals, banks etc) and subsequent loss of population in districts. Often leaving the churches being the last service provider standing. Alongside this has been the increase in secularization of our society which has painted Christianity as something to be suspicious of and to avoid in the central marketplace.

In time many of the churches have become uneconomic and it has been difficult to sustain rural ministry and the various church courts have dealt with each crisis as it has arisen. Often after much heartache and time church communities have been closed and buildings sold or amalgamated with ever increasing geographic areas. This has meant reduced services in areas and increasing the workload on the clergy involved or massive demands being placed on lay people.

Unfortunately, in most cases we have never stopped to develop a well thought out the strategy for rural ministry in our ever-changing culture. As we investigate the future the first thing needed is to clearly think through what we are trying to do in rural parish areas. The conversation must include all those who are involved in rural ministry: lay, clergy, and church courts.

WHAT IS RURAL

The first question that must be considered is *What is rural?*

What is our definition? In the New Zealand context, a more accurate definition of *rural ministry* could be any ministry unit that identifies itself as rural. This allows each ministry unit to self-select its identity and means they determine who they want to be. It is true that there are some common characteristics of rural church. The culture of a rural church differs from urban church and is determined by how you view life and the customs you base your life on and therefore it affects everything you do. For instance, how decisions are or are not made.

SPECIALISATION NEEDED IN RURAL MINISTRY

Rural church is often seen as a second best to urban church. It has been seen as a stepping-stone to a "better urban church". In days gone past this has been perpetuated by new clergy being sent out to be blooded in the rural sector. This led to some unfortunate experiences for both clergy and parishes.

In a rapidly changing world in which many things are becoming more specialised, the church in general has not thought about the selection and training of clergy/laity with the aim of specifically training them for rural ministry. There is no specific training for rural ministry in New Zealand.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

As we investigate the future which has indicated for some time a reduction of "paid ministry" there is a real need for us to embrace technology and ask how it can serve parishes. For instance, many small churches struggle with the financial reporting standards – is there some way of centralising this? Have we considered networking and the use of podcast sermons or AV worship material? This alone would release time for pastoral ministry and outward facing ministry. At present each Parish is left to institute things like software roll out, sound system management just to name a few. How many hours are used because we work in silo's and do not share our learning?

Think also of the crafting and put together services from seasonal material through to weddings and funerals. Each ministry unit spends hours looking for and resourcing ideas. Imagine the saving of time and the help it would be if we developed a way of doing this on another level. Imagine if in mid-

November an email advised everyone of what had been placed in a drop box for them to look at and consider for their Christmas service. Such a folder could have suggestions of videos, liturgy, music, sermons, crafts which has been carefully collected to make sure it is the best of current material. This would save countless hours of preparation. This would free up time to do other things. It also helps those that are less creative.

How much time do we waste individually re-inventing the wheel?

CULTURE WITHIN THE CHURCH

Rural church (as well as every other size of church) need to build a culture of true discipleship. Jesus did not start by training ministers. Rather he called people to be disciples. He called people to change in the perspective of their lives and the way they lived life. Effective discipleship learning must have these steps.

There is a mountain of discipleship programmes on the market. Many written by and for large churches. For instance, the latest one on the block, 3DMⁱ was developed in a large growing urban church who created it to train their leaders. It would be good if we could put energy into finding and evaluating material available. Then do the hard work of culturally adapting it to our situations and making the suggestions and material available to parishes.

CHURCH COURT STRUCTURE

While change might happen at the parish level there also needs to be well thought out structural change at the church court level. Though we might see change at the parish level, the church structure still demands exactly the same amount of reporting from each church even though there is not a full time employed person to produce it.

There also needs to be increasing opportunities of quality training provided for the parishioners. It is important that as this is developed, that thought is put into the training being appropriate and at a level that is not too demanding for the audience they are targeting. (It must be remembered that they do not have the time that paid clergy has nor arguably the need for such a through education). A New Zealand historical example of this is when the settler's church required Maori to be fluent in English, Greek and Latin before they would ordain Maori candidates.

ECUMENISM

Since the 1990's there has been initiatives which has seen denominations working in regions together. This was not without pain and hard work but has led to sustained and growth of fruitful ministry. Too often organisations can become territorial and protective. As we think of our desire to serve and bring glory to God we need to ask ourselves and other denominations, "What gets in the way of us working together for the Kingdom of God"? Where can we be working together more purposefully?

PULLING RURAL PARISHES TOGETHER TO NAVIGATE THE FUTURE TOGETHER

If we really want to change the way we view, value, and do rural ministry we need to develop a tool to create a culture of valuing rural church. In which we share and develop best practice across the denomination and as individual rural churches. Only in this way can we develop a cutting edge of rural ministry. It is by spending time together we will be able to find a lot of the answers to the thoughts posed above. We want to have strong rural parishes that are seeking to be all they can be, we can best foster this by creating opportunities for parish teams to meet talk and share ideas and struggles. The resulting networks will build strength, resilience and understanding which foster healthy practice and growth.

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ⁱ <https://www.3dmovements.com/>