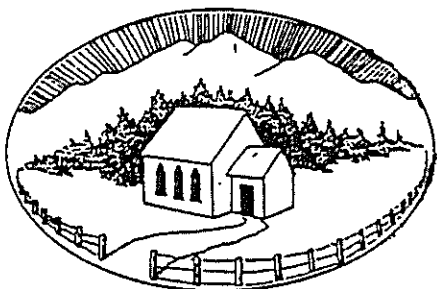


Rural Network News



No.9

July 1998

We believe in the holy Spirit who breathes warmth into the cold places, touches with living fire the deathliness in our life and remembers with grief all the hurts which we dare not name.

The Glory of Blood, Sweat and Tears, Dorothy McRae-McMahon

Please share this newsletter with others you think may be interested. Feel free to make photocopies and use articles.

A Mission with a Difference

For the winter months this year my job as Parish Minister for St John's Methven has a very different character and flavour. In one sense I've been out of circulation, taking time out from a range of church duties, but in another sense I've been very much in circulation, full-time visiting in the parish.

The year began differently - our Parish Council met twice in February. Normally we don't start until March, as harvest has many people fully occupied. But we'd been wanting to do something to revitalise parish life. Also the season was shaping up to be a hard one for our farming community (and what would winter be like for our mountain after such a hot summer?). A third trigger for action was the tenth birthday of our church building. Right in the midst of the hard times of the 80's our church community had worked together to build a new church.

So it was timely to do what we decided to do: a Special Mission, but not the sort of thing one might expect that word to mean. Parish councillors had been mulling over the need for a stir up. The germinative idea in fact began in a header cab on one of many fine harvest days. How about freeing up our minister from all other duties over a period of time to enable her to visit every household on the parish list?

Yes, a mission with a difference. No big public rallies and fanfare, but private meeting and talking together. There's a bit of a public side, as each Sunday invited preachers lead our worship. That has given us an opportunity to raise our profile through advertising widely in the community. Also it is wonderful to be so well nurtured by others, to sit back and enjoy a diversity of styles and ideas.

But the visiting is the key to our mission: nurturing our relationships. Mostly by pre-arranged appointments (including one or two each week-day evening) I spend on average an hour with often the whole household present. People have been very receptive and welcoming. I often begin with the question: our church building is ten years old - what's happened for you over the last decade? It is a great privilege to hear people's stories - listening, always in confidence, to their highs and lows, and their hopes from here on.

When the visiting task is completed, the important question will be: what now? What have we gained from this mission? What has it taught us about ourselves? What do we do next?

I'll keep you posted on that. A group of us will be attending the South Island "Creating Effective Congregations" seminar in Christchurch in August (set up by the Presbyterian Church) and we are planning to use that to make the best of our special mission. Maybe others receiving this newsletter will be attending either the North Island or the South Island seminar, or other congregational mission events. If you are and would like to send in some news and views of the event, they will be very gratefully received.

Robyn McPhail

Four Faithful Women

Lloyd Vidler met these 'Four Faithful Women' during his visit to New Zealand last year. The quality of the contribution they made to their congregation and community impressed him. In describing their gifts he acknowledges William M Easum's Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers (Abingdon Press/Nashville 1995 Appendix 1 p167). Names have been changed to respect privacy.

Ann had the good fortune to marry into a family who had, in the early days of settlement, selected a block of good land. Through a number of generations the land had been responsibly managed. When Ann and her husband assumed ownership they continued the family tradition becoming recognised as good farmers - people who care for their land and for their stock and with an eye for what was happening in the market place.

Participation in the activities of the church had always been part of the life for Ann and her husband. Although their adult children had been nurtured in the church each has now gone their own way. Career success was the

ambition of one, 'experiencing life' the pre-occupation of another. The remaining daughter and her partner had found careers that satisfied their ambitions. They participate in the life of the congregation in the neighbourhood in which they live. They were keen that those with whom they worshipped would use contemporary hymns.

Ann and her husband were valued members of their congregation. They were of the 'old stock' and were reliable. Ann's husband was early to church on a winter's morning to turn on the heaters while Ann had been the communion steward for many years.

With their children gone from home Ann and her husband had time to move beyond the local school, church and community. One of the events which attracted them was a Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conference. There they gained a more ecumenical view of the church and began to appreciate the congregation of which they were members as being part of the whole.

Discussions at the Conference confirmed some insights which they had held privately, namely the need for people in the farming community to be alert for signs of distress in times of difficulty and the need to care for the environment.

But most of all they appreciated the inspiration which came from gathering with a large number of people with similar interests and being able to share their experience of life and of church with people who understood.

When the life of their congregation is difficult and they need some support to see them through tough times they take down their Myrtleford coffee mugs* and as they savour the contents they reflect on the memory of some good experiences and remember that throughout the world there are people, like themselves, who are striving to be loyal to the faith and find answers to life's perplexing problems.

Ann brings the gift of administration to her congregation or as J B Phillips has it in his translation of I Corinthians 12 she is an 'organiser'. She quietly formulates and enacts procedures which enhance the functioning of the congregation which help to maintain its life and keep it focussed on its future.

* *Coffee mugs were given to all who attended the Myrtleford Rural Ministry Conference April 1996.*

Jane and her husband had farmed on the one property for many years. The time had come for their son to take over the running of the farm and for them to move into a nearby town and to enjoy retirement. That dream was to be shorted lived for in a few brief years her husband died. It didn't take Jane long to find her niche within the life of the congregation of the town to which she had retired. She was of similar age and interests to a number of others. Her gracious manner commended her to people and her speech was always kindly and charitable.

The arrival of a new pastor brought a number of changes. While the congregation consisted mainly of older people the pastor was young. While the congregation had known only one Christian tradition the pastor had known several. While the congregation saw their future in maintaining the tradition in which they had been nurtured the pastor was convinced that the church must change if it was going to survive.

For some within the congregation the contrasts were so great that the different positions could not be reconciled. Some left to find their spiritual home in another place. Jane, like many others, stayed.

Jane feels the pain of those who have left the congregation but there is never a word which would reflect ill on the pastor. Jane participates in the ministry of visitation and prays thoughtfully for people within her care.

Faithfulness and loyalty mark her life. There may be disquiet in the congregation but her part is not to take sides. Her part is to be a faithful respondent to the God who has called her.

Guests in Jane's home quickly come to appreciate her gift for hospitality. It is generous, thoughtful and caring. Hospitality is part of her spirituality. When, at the beginning of a meal, she offers thanks it is done in the words of a woman who expresses gratitude for all of God's gifts and who consciously invites God into every activity of the day. She carefully cultivates the life of God within as she daily meditates on Scripture and awaits God's leading.

She is a gift of God to the congregation of which she is part and to all who know her. In particular her gifts are those of hospitality and intercession. She generously opens her home to guests. She prays regularly for people within the congregation and community.

Margaret is an unpretentious person. On first meeting there is little indication of her range of interests or the respect in which she is held by those who know her well. Slowly her qualifications and ability are revealed. Hanging on the dining room wall is a Diploma indicating her training and competence as an elocutionist. That achievement simply bears witness to the fact that there is more to be known and appreciated about her.

Margaret has lived in the one region all her life. Born and educated in a service town she married a farmer and joined him on the family property. Together they have known good years but have also experienced the near loss of all that they had accomplished in their years together.

Margaret and her husband are members of the Host Farm programme. The many people who have stayed in their home have stimulated their thinking and social understanding. Margaret is a member of the garden club. She enjoys the beauty with which she is surrounded and eagerly awaits the arrival of each spring. She is widely

known and well respected in the local community and has been elected to the District Council. She also serves on a number of other community committees and task groups.

She worships regularly in her neighbourhood church bringing to worship and her participation in the congregation an alert understanding of what is occurring around her. Her participation in the life of the church beyond her own congregation has given her insights and understanding that she is able to offer as guidance to the local church. She has a great concern for rural congregations, being aware of diminishing resources, of small congregations and the need for a new way of being the church.

In the midst of change and uncertainty Margaret stands as a person who gives a feeling that security is an experience beyond the known structures of the church. Her trust is in God. That gives an assurance that, in spite of change that will inevitably come, all will be well.

Margaret gives evidence of many spiritual gifts. She has faith. For her an impasse is a detour which can be worked around in the pursuit of accomplishing the work of God. Having the gift of discernment she is able to see through phoney individuals and ideas. She is a wise person as she can see how particular knowledge should be applied to specific needs. She also has the gift of mercy enabling her to respond lovingly and compassionately to both the church and the unchurched who are suffering.

Helen was the eldest of a large family. As was the case with the eldest in many farming families she was required to finish her schooling at an early age. Her place was to be in the home caring for younger brothers and sisters.

She married into a family with large property holdings and moved a considerable distance from her paternal home. There she raised her own family, participated in the life of the farm and took her place in the community. She attended the local Anglican Church.

The encouragement given by a newly appointed rector was a turning point in Helen's relationship to the church. There were changes afoot in the church. The rector was helping the congregation in mission planning. Through that process it became evident that the congregation would not be able to support a minister working full time. A vision of lay people taking greater responsibility for the life of the congregation and using their gifts in leadership was emerging. In that process Helen was called by her congregation to be worship leader and celebrant at the sacraments.

At the same other realities were stirring in Helen's life. With family responsibilities receding she felt a need to break out of the chrysalis that had enclosed her. Circumstances allowed her to realise some of the potential that had earlier been denied her. She was on a journey of individuation. Within the life of her

congregation Helen is recognised as a leader. She is able to articulate a vision in such a way that other members of the faith community discover ways in which they can make the vision a reality. Her experience, insight and broad knowledge of the church help her to contribute constructively to the development of the congregation's ministry. She is able to assess the information she gathers and share material and concepts essential to the work of the faith community.

Lloyd Vidler, Bowral, NSW

A Poem

Good morning!

I love to watch the trees awake
from Winter's sleep to summer's morn
I love to see the leaves emerge
And with their cloak a branch adorn
'neath their canopy, out stretched arm
I feel quite safe, at peace, no harm.

Many years as silent witness
Quiet through your cycles flow
O what truth your sap absorbs
all your rings the seasons know

Who ordained your height, your shape
Spendrous green to clothe and drape
That tall and strong on landscape stand
You windswept boughs caress the land?

All from tiny kernel, spinning start or spiny seed
Soil and moisture, warmth enfold
Pregnant earth declares your creed
Seedling breaks to asur'd sky
Little fingers upward ply
Silent runners, unseen place
Forest chapel taking place

No trumpet blast, no cry or noise
All portrayed for touch and eye
Tall you stand above the heads,
of us who wither, wrinkle, die
All for a time and season
Your trunks a wall, your leaves a ceil
I see take shape an altar
where brought before your maker
I humble, pray and kneel

©John Turton, Reporoa

Rural Stream for VISION NZ Congress

Waikanae, 17-22 January 1999

VISION New Zealand which began working in 1992 will include in its next Congress a whole 'stream' devoted to rural church and community. "Evangelising Rural New Zealand" is one of a number of issues raised

at the previous Congress¹ in 1996 to be taken up in elective 'streams' within the 1999 Congress.

The editor of this newsletter has been asked to lead the rural stream. It will be a mix of plenary sessions and workshops, with plenty of opportunity to share insights and stories and an overall goal of raising energy levels and revitalising gospel spirit.

Would any readers of this newsletter be interested in attending? Please get in touch with the editor, Robyn McPhail, if you think you might go, or have any level of interest, would like to contribute within the programme or would just like to know more. The Congress will be held at Waikanae, beginning with Powhiri at 3.30pm on Sunday 17 January and ending early afternoon Friday 22. Costs: registration \$235 (\$195 before 31 October); basic accommodation with meals \$100 (other options available); transport from Wellington Airport \$30. Check <http://www.vision-nz.co.nz> or contact Congress Registrar, Box 45004 Auckland 1008.

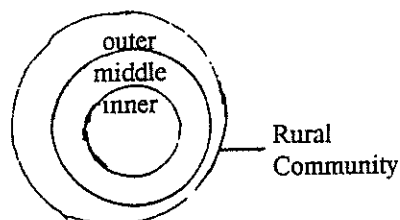
'Unleashing the Church'

The conversation continues

Ron Schepers from Winton opened up a topic for discussion with his book review two editions ago. Lynette Fowler's comments stirred his mind into action again. Here is Ron's:

Further Reflection on Rural Ministry

Lynette raises an important point that not all people in a rural centre have what Frank Tillapaugh terms a "rural psyche" (in *Unleashing the Church*, Regal Books, California, 1982). Last year as part of my rural ministries paper through EIDTS* I did extensive research into the community in which I live. In my discussions with community leaders it became quickly apparent that the area in which I live closely follows the following social circles:



In the inner circle are those who have been born in the area, went to school there and work there. These people are least likely to have travelled or gained tertiary education. Their world view is more limited and they are more likely to have a rural psyche of maintaining the status quo and resisting change, thinking small rather than big, staying put rather than being mobile and having a general wariness of strangers. In the middle are those who have come from outside the area, have lived there for some time and have an interest in the community. Some of these middle people may have adopted a rural psyche, or because of their "outside" experience, travel

or education, may have a broader world view. The outer circle are those who are new and are only beginning to get involved in the community and also likely to have a broader world view.

To say that everyone in a rural community has a rural psyche is no more true than saying everyone wearing gumboots and shorts is a farmer. The rural psyche seems most common among those of the inner circle, many of whom are found sitting on boards and committees because they are part of the established community.

In Lynette's article I get the impression that she has encountered some of the effects of a rural psyche when it becomes part of the leadership and establishment of a church. This can include family loyalties and bias, lack of independent grievance procedures, people sitting on committees who have no practical or elected purpose in being there, lack of accommodation and association with those outside the church network. Indeed, the negative side of rural thinking can be detrimental to the outreach of the church into the community.

The Salvation Army in Winton nearly closed in 1993 because rural psyche leadership had been allowed to dominate. Congregation size dipped to around eight people and the church was on the verge of closing. It was only when new officers with broader experience, a larger vision and more progressive thoughts came and challenged the established leadership that things began to change. Since that time, with a continuation of the larger vision, the church has continued to grow to a congregation of 80-90. Predominantly these people are from the middle and outer circles of the community.

The challenge I face is how to have an outreach to those in the inner circle as well as maintaining an emphasis on positive change, bigger vision and greater involvement in the community. While I am not willing to compromise our current direction because it is growing the church, my heart still goes to those who may be alienated by our direction, people who also need to experience and know the message of Jesus. It may be that as the churches of Winton we together maintain diversity and focus on different groups within the community, some reaching out to traditional rural people, whilst others like ourselves focus on people with a more contemporary world view. In my observations of churches and community groups, trying to assimilate both views often leads to conflict and trying to accommodate both leaves each group unsatisfied with the results.

Reading the book *Unleashing the Church* by Frank Tillapaugh sparked much of my thinking, some of which I have expounded here. I would value more discussion by other readers, by way of this newsletter.

Ron Schepers, Winton

* Ecumenical Institute of Distance Theological Studies

God give us rain when we expect sun.
Give us music when we expect trouble.
Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
God play with us, turn us sideways and around. Amen

A Common Prayer, Michael Leunig

From a Beneficiary

The following has been reprinted with permission from Harvest Field, the magazine of the Association of Presbyterian Women. It is probably an urban story but what it tells is definitely rural experience too. It is sure to offer insight for some in our rural communities, solidarity for others.

We are fortunate in that we do not have a mortgage so we are not struggling to the same degree as some other beneficiaries. However, as beneficiaries we have little power and very few rights. We have a society of high unemployment caused by government policy. As beneficiaries we are blamed for the plight we find ourselves in but it is not our fault.

This is the reality of our lives and many like us:

In 1991 my university educated husband who had worked most of his working life as a shop assistant was made redundant when his company, a well known retailer, went into receivership as a consequence of the flow-on effect of the sharemarket crash in 1987 and subsequent economic restructuring. At 51 years and unskilled he was unable to get another job despite many efforts. I was a schoolteacher but had to retire due to disabilities that regularly require expensive blood product as well as other medications. Once I could earn extra income by teaching special needs pupils at home but then the pool of students ran out. I would like to think that it was because the need no longer existed but I know it is because in this economic climate the parents on low incomes could no longer afford the minimal fees. I get assistance to pay for my medical needs and together my husband and I live on the married rate for my invalid's benefit. We are both 58 years old.

We both feel marginalised because ours and the situation of many beneficiaries is either ignored or when people do notice us, as a group we are highlighted in a way that makes us feel vulnerable.

The work for the benefit scheme is an example. If I were made to work I would become ill due to my disabilities. I can run a home but anything more demanding and I would very quickly become ill again. My husband has tried to find work but has not succeeded because there is none due to the economic climate. By taking a job under the work for the benefit scheme he is at the mercy of his employer who can exploit him in any

way because he loses his benefit if he does not retain his job.

I wonder what type of work will be available. Clearing gorse has been mentioned as an option. It is soul destroying to be on a benefit but I wonder how much self esteem will be derived from doing these demeaning tasks instead of 'real' jobs for real pay. It seems like another way of punishing beneficiaries.

And of course we have to live with the implication that, because we draw a benefit, we are defrauding the country. While I know we are not benefit fraudsters it feels as though we are guilty by association each time the radio or television advertisements are run. We both contributed to the government with our taxes for many years and through it willingly gave those who had to call on it a hand up when they needed it.

Generally TV programmes and advertisements are written for audiences who have jobs and at least average incomes. The media, government and local body policies are usually about things that are to be done for and to and about beneficiaries and not with them.

I cringe every time I hear the deputy Prime Minister refer to us as 'the poor'. The patronising term carries a sense of our needing to be pitied, of being a group at the bottom of the heap and of blame. I remember in the early days of our redundancy, when we had substantial debt, when filling in a form for rates relief we were asked, among other things, exactly how much toilet paper we used and exactly how much we spent on birthday and Christmas gifts. It was also heart-breaking to have to sell family treasures like my mother's engagement ring and my 21st birthday gift from my brother who died ten years earlier and my grandmother's bracelet. Later, as the realisation that I would never get them back and that I had not been paid a fair price because the buyer knew I needed the money sank in, an incredible sadness came over me.

My husband is a church elder and yet as participating members of the church community we often feel the fact that we are on a benefit is unacknowledged. We feel 'faceless' or a problem that is best ignored because it is too big a problem to solve perhaps.

All I ask for from the church is an acknowledgment that in New Zealand we need to start looking for an answer to close the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have nots. Some of us would like to contribute for example to child sponsorship programmes but a dollar a day is not nothing and is hard to find. Those of us who cannot contribute feel on the edge of the church community. There is a need for an acceptance of the value of people as beneficiaries and for it to be considered, when ministers preach on welfarism, that there are beneficiaries sitting in the pews.

Marlene Carter

Book Review: Farm Family Relationships

The lack of willingness among some of the older generation to let control of the farm pass to the next generation can create considerable difficulties. Some sons never fulfil their potential as managers, unfair control is exercised, progressive farming methods go untried, the human spirit is crushed.

My attention was drawn to Joanna Trollope's novel *Next of Kin*. I had seen the serialisation of *The Choir* on television and had heard of *The Rector's Wife*. What would *Next of Kin* have to offer to me?

Next of Kin is the story of the interactions of a farming family. It is set in England so the question of property ownership is therefore different but the dynamics which mark the interrelationships of the main characters are recognisable.

The Meredith family lived at Dean Place Farm. Father, Harry, and second son Joe, are croppers. Robin, on a separate property, raises cattle, an enterprise of which his father is critical.

The death of Robin's wife, Caro, is the catalyst through which Trollope reveals the dysfunctional nature of the family's relationships. Caro, an American, was never really part of the family nor did she involve herself in the farm. She did little around the house, was unable to bear children and slept in her own room.

Judy, Robin and Caro's adopted daughter, hated the farm. She was happily settled in the city pursuing her career. By contrast Judy's flat mate, Zoe, loved the farm. She also had a circumspect love for Robin which raised suspicion and provided the setting to explore the divergence between old and new views of relational morality.

Caro's death caused uneasiness in the life of Debbie the farmhand's wife. She put pressure on Gareth to seek a new job. Gareth's loyalties are severely tested.

There was a quality in Caro's life that attracted Joe and with her passing some inner delight left his spirit. His proclivity to depression took its place. He ended his own life. Harry was debilitated by Joe's suicide. He became weak, ill and disinterested in life. Joe's wife, Lyndsay, was encouraged by her parents to leave the farm. They were endeavouring to make decisions for her. Harry's wife, Dilys, could see no future for herself and Harry except that they lease the farm and move into town.

The destructive family dynamics are transformed when Zoe leaves Dean Place Farm and returns to the city. Judy and Robin come to terms with their life without Caro and express warmth towards each other. Lyndsay decides to make her life on the farm. Dean Place Farm becomes a place where people are cared for and cooperate with each other. The future looks bright.

For a sensitive insight into the dynamics which affect farming families *Next of Kin* is an important book. It

informs the understanding of human behaviour. It gives an insight into the ruinous nature of rigid positions. It accents the transformation which understanding, cooperation and acceptance achieve.

If you are the member of a farming family and read this book you are likely to recognise that someone understands the human condition. If you are involved in rural ministry it will remind you of situations with which you are familiar and alert you to pastoral situations that you may have to deal with at some future time.

As I read the book I was constantly reminded of the work of Ed Friedman in his book *Generation to Generation*. Friedman shows the way in which the dynamics which are occurring in family life are played out by those families in the life of the congregation to which they belong. To know how your congregation works it is important to know how the members of each family relate to each other and what the relationships are family to family. The positives and negatives in family life are enacted in the life of the congregation. Long held family disputes have the ability to explode in the Parish Council or Elders Meeting. A person who is possessive or overbearing in the life of the family is likely to be that in the life of the congregation.

Lloyd Vidler, Bowral, NSW



The Spirit's Presence

God of fire,
we are your people,
enflamed by your love
and blown by your Spirit.
May the Spirit's presence
kindle fires of warmth and hope
within our community,
against the winter chill of aloofness.
Let us care for one another,
make plans together,
recognise each other's gifts,
confront injustice in our midst,
and live the values of the kingdom.

From *Listen to the Shepherd: Whakarongo ki te Kupu*,
by Bill Bennett, Church Mouse Press, 38 Joseph St,
Palmerston North, 1997

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Contributions of news, views, insights on anything to do with the rural church, its ministry and gospel mission gratefully received.