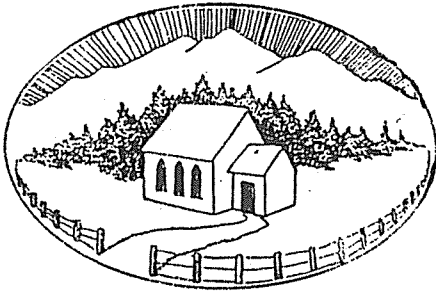


Rural Network News



No.13

November 1999

God of the seasons,
we are now on daylight saving,
but all time is yours.
Help us be responsible managers
of all with which you have entrusted us.

Bill Bennett, *Listen to the Shepherd*

Please share this newsletter with others you think may be interested. Feel free to make photocopies.
Comments on any material in this newsletter are always welcome.

Understanding Lawn Care

Imagine the conversation the Creator might have with St. Francis about lawn care:

"Frank, you know all about gardens and nature. What in the world is going on down there? What happened to the dandelions, violets, thistles and stuff I started eons ago? I had a perfect, no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long-lasting blossoms attracted butterflies, honey bees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colours by now. But all I see are these green rectangles."

"It's the tribes that settled there, Lord. They started calling your flowers 'weeds' and went to great extent to kill them and replace them with grass."

"Grass? But grass is so boring. It's not colourful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees, only grubs and sod worms. It's temperamental with temperatures. Do these tribes really want all that grass growing there?"

"Apparently so, Lord. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilising it and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn."

"The spring rains and cool weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make them happy."

"Apparently not, Lord. As soon as it grows a little, they cut it - sometimes twice a week."

"They cut it? Do they then bale it like hay?"

"Not exactly, Lord. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags."

"They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?"

"No, sir. Just the opposite. They pay to throw it away."

"Now let me get this straight. They fertilise grass so it will grow. And when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?"

"Yes, sir."

"They must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work."

"You aren't going to believe this Lord. When the grass stops growing so fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it."

"What nonsense! At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn they fall to the ground and form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. Plus, as they rot, the leaves form compost to enhance the soil. It's the natural circle of life."

"You better sit down, Lord. They've drawn a new circle. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into great piles and have them hauled away."

"No! What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter and keep the soil moist and loose?"

"After throwing away your leaves, they go out and buy something they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves."

"And where do they get this mulch?"

"They cut down trees and grind them up."

"I've heard enough! I don't want to think about this anymore. Saint Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you scheduled for us tonight?"

"Dumb and Dumber, Lord. It's a real stupid movie about..."

"Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story."

Anon., Cyberspace

Children's Holiday Programme

St Andrew's Westshore is a shared ministry parish encompassing a large rural area extending from Westshore to Te Puhoe on the Taupo Road, and through Kaiwaka, Tutira, Putorino and Kotemaori on the Wairoa Road. Because of the scattered nature of the parish it has been difficult for country families to be involved in our worship on a regular basis and, although we had invited these children to attend previous holiday programmes, we did not seem to succeed in making it easy for them to come. So we decided that it would be a much better idea to take the holiday programme to them and get to know some of the children of our parish.

So off to Tareha Hall we headed on the first Monday of the June-July holidays armed with paints, brushes, hammers, nails, wood, string, feathers and glue. Two

high school girls from Napier had offered to help as well as a woman from the local community and another from our Westshore church whose grandchildren live in the rural area.

Twenty-five children aged 5 to 13 arrived at the hall not seeming to mind the bitterly cold day. The theme for the day was "Birds in the Bible" and the place soon buzzed with activity as budding carpenters hammered away at bird feeder tables, faces were painted, pizzas were made for lunch, bird puddings were made to hang in trees, birds were painted for a mural and art works were created with feathers and glue. There was time too for games and stories before ending at 2pm. The adults really enjoyed getting to know a great bunch of kids. We felt very encouraged by the response and would like to develop this special relationship in this and other outlying areas of our parish.

A similar programme was held at Westshore on the Thursday morning. A nicer day meant time outdoors at the estuary observing the variety of birds there.

We are grateful to all the children who joined us and allowed us to share with them in some small way the "good news" of Jesus. I hope that the seeds that they planted may grow to remind them that we are the soil and from every little seed that is sown something good may grow.

Coralie Brooks, Westshore, Hawke's Bay

A Conversation on RFD+

"I am seeking help. I am a pastor of a rural church of which has given up an vision of reaching their community for Christ. The town is a small town of 800. We are 30 miles east of KC, Mo. Their reasons is that they are all old and cannot or not able to get out and be a vital ministry of the church. I have tried to encourage them and set up times for discussion about what we can do to increase our attendance and minister to the unsaved people in our town. Our church is running about 15 in attendance. I am becoming discouraged. What ever you might share would be helpful."

Chris Anderson

Wow, 15 attend, I only get 8. We are experimenting with a different model of ministry, more a community chaplaincy. I told our folk that it is not my aim to get people to come to church but to get you (them) out of it, and we began to work through the implications. First if they are normal country folk they are already doing a great deal of Christian missionary and social work. Even if older they will be involved in various groups, bowls, golf, hall committees, land care, farmers associations, business groups, senior citizens, schools, whatever. They will be aware of and concerned for neighbours and friends and the various aspects of their community. This IS Christian mission - celebrate it in a thanksgiving and dedication service. Tell them they don't have to come to

church on Sunday providing they bring a note saying they were having a cuppa with a lonely or sick neighbour.

Join in with other community groups yourself, (almost) forget building the church, that can be very inward looking, take the church to the community, we have a perspective on life and living, a contribution to the wholeness of people that is missing without the faith element. But don't push institutional expressions of Christianity. That is dead in most areas and people have been burned by bad experiences of church. Most people have a faith or a spirituality: it is the way God created us, so help them to identify and name their own faith. Almost everyone tells me first visit that they don't believe in God, I get them to tell me about this God they don't believe in as it is usually (always) one I don't believe in either. It is possible to maintain ones own integrity of faith and grow other peoples if you do not equate too closely God and church - be radical, Jesus is.

The faith is not 16th century liturgies, 18th century hymns, and 19th century buildings, God is creator of ALL, Jesus is radical redeemer, and Spirit is life, compassion and justice wherever.

This won't put "bums on pews", at least not quickly. But it will grow the Spirituality of the whole community and it will enable the people of the church to take God into many places where he already is.

Rob Dummermuth, East Gippsland, Victoria

Conversation used with permission. RFD+ is a daily Rural Ministry Discussion list provided by CHASSIE and the Center for Rural Church Leadership. You can now easily access RFD+, the Center for Rural Church Ministry and all the CHASSIE pages at: <http://ruralchurch.org>

Hard Times for Apple Orchardists

ENZA's August schedule noted the budget market price for Braeburn of \$14 per tray and the revised forecast of \$7 to \$9 per tray for the 1999 harvest. Price decreases are expected for virtually all varieties even if not to the same extent.

The latest assessment of Hawkes Bay orchards is that less than 50% will make a cash orchard surplus (gross revenue minus orchard costs) this 1999/2000 financial year, and less than 10% will have a disposable profit after tax, living expenses and interest costs are deducted. There is going to be a real cash problem for a significant number of orchardists in Hawkes Bay and in other pipfruit growing districts. However Hawkes Bay growers have also had to cope with hail and sunburn problems.

Orchardists needed good apple prices to recover from losses made in previous years. The reduced prices will mean that many will have to lease their properties or sell. As orchardists have received 60% to 65% of the expected value for last season's apples the final apple payout will be greatly reduced and they will be forced into further borrowing for spraying, picking and packing.

Because of the drop in revenue orchardists have been driven to using sprays for thinning instead of paying wages. This has meant less money for the labour force. Also the sprays do not do such a good job as people and that too has devalued the average return.

Comments from the Nelson district suggest that many people are becoming demoralised - they have 'had enough'. What with adverse weather conditions and the downturn in prices it is hard to be positive about the future.

The Banking industry has resolved to stand by those who have potential to trade out of the situation, but there are some with insurmountable debt problems which can only be fixed by exiting the industry. No one wants this, but it will be the only choice in some cases.

There is definitely a place for the church in providing support for people in trouble, particularly by working through the Rural Support Teams at the local level.

The network of Rural Trusts covering east coast areas from Gisborne to South Otago and on the West Coast provide financial negotiation services at no cost to rural families in financial difficulty. The work is carried out by rural co-ordinators who are independent and can negotiate with creditors and financiers. They are also skilled in managing stressful situations and will advise families where they can get other support.

With regard to Income Support, a Rural Sector Assistance programme may be approved for farming and orchard families when a significant adverse climatic event reduces the income available to the family from the farm or orchard business to the extent that they need assistance to meet essential family needs. Applications for the assistance are usually made in consultation with a rural co-ordinator.

A Rural Sector Assistance programme is currently running with respect to the droughts in the summers of 1998 and 1999 in Hawke's Bay, Wairarapa, Marlborough, Canterbury and Otago (including Central Otago). This programme expires on 31 March 2000. Farmers in Westland are also receiving assistance as a result of an exceptionally wet 12 month period.

Farmers' entitlement to the assistance is assessed on 3 monthly budgets. Orchard families who have received RSA over the 1999 winter are currently having their budgets reassessed for the next three months. Several factors are taken into account when assessing eligibility. However, RSA is not available when there is a significant reduction in incomes due to market changes driven by factors other than an adverse climatic event.

Thanks for material received from Don Bagnall with MAF Policy and Graeme Todd in the Nelson District.

Malvern Youth Project

Do you puzzle over possibilities for Youth Ministry in your parish? Are you looking for ways to be a community-facing church? Here is an idea from the Canterbury Plains.

The Malvern Youth Project was developed in the latter stages of 1998 and into 1999 with the purpose of assessing the needs of youth in the Malvern area. It is open to any interested in participating. At present the team consists of a broad range of people from throughout the community, including local church leaders, police, a youth worker, parents, students, etc. The team has worked in conjunction with Darfield High School in assessing youth concerns.

In its initial stages the Malvern Youth Project team has been focusing on consulting with youth about what they believe would improve the Malvern area for them. The consultation process began with the distribution of a simple questionnaire to all Darfield High School students. Attempts were also made to include local students who live in the area, but go to school outside it. The questionnaire consisted of a statement and a question:

Malvern is a great place to live.

What could be done to make it better for you and your friends?

The questionnaire was anonymous, and for demographic reasons the age and sex of students were recorded.

The result of the questionnaire saw over 500 pieces of paper returned to the team, which were then collated and analysed. Answers were wide and varied and responses were narrowed down into broad categories. The team was then left with the 'top 10' categories, a couple of which were beyond the scope of the team's objectives (e.g. building a bank). The final categories were collapsed into four groups around which further class discussions could be held in anticipation of class representatives reporting to 'The Summit'.

The Summit was held at the Darfield Recreation Centre on 11 June 1999. Male and female representatives from each Darfield High School class were present with a total of over 50 students attending. Four groups (based on school year levels) discussed the main topics selected on the basis of the pre-Summit questionnaire. The topics were:

A fun park

Music, dances, bands, etc.

Transport, Movie Theatres, Fast Food

Hang Out Place

The discussion groups were run by adult facilitators selected from the Project team and the wider community, with scribes taking notes and assisting with facilitation.

Brief summaries were given in a reporting back time to the whole group. Students were then thanked for their contribution to what had seemed, by all accounts, a productive and successful day.

The Summit was seen as a beginning point. The MYP team strongly believes that youth have to be involved in the process if any of the initiatives suggested in the questionnaire and supported at the Summit are to come to fruition. Initial areas being considered for action are:

- Transport - arranging bus transport into Christchurch and return on some Friday nights;
- Dances - recruiting enthusiastic youth to arrange discos, bands, outside summer raves;
- Hang Out Place - gathered the most enthusiasm from the Summit, but good youth support is vital.

More information can be obtained from Bruce Hamill: 03 318 8252 email: dbhamill@clear.net.nz

Orientation to Rural Ministry Experiences from Southern Ontario

As Canada has become increasingly urban, the structure and methods of its institutions, including the church, have been altered to fit an urban way of life. The majority of congregations in the United Church, however, are still in rural areas, and many rural charges have found that urban ways of doing, saying, and even thinking about ministry have become increasingly inappropriate. Many ministers whose first charge is in a rural area arrive quite unprepared for rural ministry. They often fail to recognise that the culture of rural areas is different from the ones in which they grew up and that the theologies of rural people can be very different from those to which they were exposed at theological college.

"Rural" to us means more than "agricultural" since many rural communities depend on other resource-based industries such as forestry, fishing, tourism or mining. Many areas are in transition, as the resource-based industries are being replaced by tourism or a commuter-based economy. The Southern Ontario Orientation to Rural Ministry (SOORM) provides a means to understand a community's history, the changes that are taking place and the tensions that can exist between life-long residents and those new to the community.

AIMS AND ASSUMPTIONS

SOORM was initiated in 1987 to give greater confidence and a positive perspective of what it means to be 'rural' to those ministers who are assuming positions of leadership within rural pastorates. It assists them to:

- observe and experience something of the life, work and faith of rural people.
- examine the influence of changes in the local economy on rural people and communities.
- consider the effects of changes in the social fabric of rural communities.
- learn techniques to foster their personal well-being and became part of a support network.
- reflect upon what it means to be part of the Church in a rural community.
- deepen their commitment to rural ministry.

Three fundamental assumptions underlie the approach used:

- There is a distinct rural theology, that shapes, and is shaped by, the very existence of rural people and their relationship with each other, with the land, with nature

and with the Creator. (Rural people rarely talk about this theology - it is not spoken as much as it is lived and it is learned more by experience and example than by preaching.)

- Learning is shaped by context, necessitating both an openness to new experiences and new insights, and a willingness to reflect critically upon them. Rural theology and culture are best learned through being in a rural setting.
- Those best able to provide clergy with the experiences and skills needed to respond to the unique demands of rural ministry are within the rural community itself.

PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

Each event is led by a team of four rural people, comprised of a balance of clergy and lay, male and female. Most of the clergy leaders are past participants of the programme and the relationship among leaders and participants is that of "co-learners", not "teacher/student". We recognise the value and validity of the experiences and opinions of all present, leaders and participants alike. This fosters an atmosphere of trust and a mutual sharing of experiences, insights and concerns.

SOORM is offered to ministers who are serving their first pastoral charge after ordination or commissioning. We believe it is crucial that the orientation occur early in the pastoral relationship. Our intent is to help those in rural ministry avoid problems, not to fix them up after they have arisen. When they first come together they have been serving their pastoral charge for about four months and the realities of being in ministry in a rural area have begun to sink in. The "honeymoon" is starting to come to an end and in some cases, tensions are beginning to develop. They have begun to identify specific areas of concern and are more receptive to learning about rural ministry than they would be at an earlier stage of their education.

Nevertheless, holding this event in a minister's first year in ordered ministry does spark controversy. Ministers are reluctant to be absent from their pastoral charge, so soon after having arrived. Some pastoral charges, that have not been involved before, are likewise concerned about having their minister away for a week. After the programme is completed, however, both participants and pastoral charges are supportive of the programme.

AUTUMN AND SPRING SESSIONS

SOORM consists of two sessions; the first being in Autumn (in mid-October in Canada). At this event, participants spend six days (Wednesday to Monday) in a rural community, experiencing the life, work and worship of rural people, including one day billeted with a rural family. In mid-to-late April (the Canadian Spring) the group gathers again, for five days Monday to Friday at Five Oaks Centre. This second event is devoted largely to

discussion of case studies presented by each participant and leader.

The Autumn session, hosted by rural parishes, is a carefully structured mix of workshops and open space discussions. The emphasis on the first day is on getting acquainted and building community. Much of the second day is devoted to a tour of the area, to help the participants identify the effects of the local economy, and the changes it is undergoing, on the life of the community and church. The tour usually includes visits to farms and businesses related to agriculture, such as feed mill, and processing plant, as well as non-agricultural parts of the local economy. In the evening, there is opportunity for leaders and participants to reflect upon their observations during the tour.

At the end of the third day, participants accompany their host families to their homes and to truly share in the experience of the life and work of a rural family. They experience the full range of rural life, from getting up at 6am to help with chores, to putting the children to bed. Countless hours are spent around the kitchen table mutually learning about rural life, work and ministry.

Because the programme fosters openness to learning, participants feel free to ask about things they do not understand - an openness that often continues once they return to their own congregations. They come to appreciate how fully the lives of the entire family are shaped by the dictates of farm work and the whims of the weather. Almost invariably they express awe at the complexity of the business of farming and the apparent ease with which farmers make operational decisions and adapt "on the go" to changing conditions.

Participants begin to learn some of the rural language. Any business has its own jargon, baffling to the uninitiated. One may need years to absorb the full vocabulary, but a grasp of the basics is essential to understanding the life, work and concerns of rural people. Most importantly, participants learn that the love of nature and the need to be "on the land" are ingrained in the soul of rural people. They are at the very root of their theology and of their existence.

The group gathers again the following Spring for a five day retreat at Five Oaks, to share and reflect upon the events of the previous few months. They re-establish and strengthen the support group that developed during the Autumn session. In this supportive environment, they feel free to "de-brief" openly, to reflect upon their learnings and analyse the dynamics of their pastoral charges. As they share they discover the differences and similarities among congregations and communities, they hear of things that work and some that don't, and begin to recognise and value the blessings that their congregations have to offer.

LEARNING FROM RURAL PEOPLE

We believe that to be successful in rural ministry, a minister has to be open to learning about rural life from the people in the congregation and communities where he

or she is serving. Therefore our programme is structured to assist those whose training has been largely academic to be open to adopting a more experiential approach to learning. In particular the day-long contact with a rural family provides opportunities for discussion and learning at a depth and breadth that is not available through any other approach. Openness to learning from rural people is also fostered by the mix of lay and clergy on the leadership team. This provides an additional learning experience well-connected to rural life and rural church.

David Morris, Markdale, Ontario

David, a lay member of the United Church of Canada, is an agriculturalist by nature and occupation. He grew up in a small rural church and has an enduring commitment to rural life, community and church.

Drought and fire - half a year later

A kind autumn, winter and early spring, and the kindness of people near and far, have brought healing and hope to Central Otago, exceeding the most we could find faith for last February as fires raged over thousands of hectares tinder-dry after two years of drought. It's a miracle wrought in love and nature to the hearts of our land and our people.

Of course, the effects of pain, loss and uncertainty are still here. Farm indebtedness has risen to even more perilous levels. The spring greenness of paddocks is in part due to drastic cutting of livestock numbers, especially in the Ida Valley and Maniototo districts. Cash-flow will be eroded for at least another two years even if there's no more drought - and another hot, dry season seems already to be shaping. Uninsured fences and buildings have not all been rebuilt in the fire-ravaged Knobbies and Springvale districts. The regional economy is still affected by such factors as there being fewer sheep to shear so fewer shearers' dollars spent in shops and pubs. But the land survives, with its amazing capacity to find within its life the means to heal itself. The community survives, showing more life and hope than we dared pray for only half a year ago.

A special part in the healing process has been played by Christian folk in other heartland communities throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.

The people of Geraldine Anglican Parish baked and sent fruit cakes. So did the combined Christians of the Upper Clutha district. The people of Waimea Plains, Southland, sent to the children of our most drought-ravaged districts the home-made chocolate eggs normally distributed at Easter in their own churches. Countless friends assured us of their prayers. Cakes, prayers and chocolate may not feed sheep or balance budgets. But they represented a great reservoir of understanding, supportive love notably lacking in the response from the urban devotees of the monetarist-consumer economy. We were assured that rural New Zealand society may have lost equity, population and political clout but not

active faith or compassionate love. It meant infinitely more than any value measured in dollars. Thank you!

Amid such dramatic events as our drought and fires, our small faith communities could have been pardoned for assuming that such secular organizations as Victim Support, Federated Farmers, Civil Defence, fire and ambulance services and so on would provide victims with all the guidance and support needed. These groups indeed, on the whole, worked hard and well - often with church members in their front lines. Yet our parish published and distributed a flier telling Ida Valley farm families where drought assistance could be accessed because the need was urgent and the "official" channels were unprepared to meet it.

Visiting victims with the odd fruit cake and bottle of wine after the fires, one realized that the discernible presence of God's Church in these circumstances may be needed and valued in these "post-Christian" times more than ever. We have no political axe to grind. We are independent of State funding. No one seriously imagines any more that we have, in this context, a hidden agenda to manipulate bottoms onto our pews and dollars into our collection plates. We could offer nothing more magic or material than a listening heart in a world where responsive listening in unconditional love is at such a premium.

Boyd Wilson, Alexandra

Plugging the Leaks in Rural Towns

Another RFD+ comment, used with permission

I was interested in the [RFD+] discussion about rural towns. For too long, as an evangelical, I cared about saving souls and didn't see the relevance of community work to that goal. As I've improved my study of kingdom theology I've come to see that part of our calling is to fight for any of the great kingdom values embodied in our rural life, and against those processes which degrade them.

So, empty shops, struggling businesses, exported youth, - these are not part of God's vision for a world where every person should be able to sit under their own fig tree - presumably with their children gainfully employed in the district.

One idea that grabbed my attention recently, was a 2-day workshop in a small rural town near here called Quambatook. It was entitled "Plugging the Leaks in Your Local Economy".

The idea was to make an audit of where the money flows in the town, e.g. a small business makes money in the town, but buys all its wholesale ingredients out of town. They then ask the question, could some of those ingredients be sourced locally?

In other words, trace where the money goes, and seek to keep as much of it in places that benefit the local community. There was more to it than that, but this idea whetted my interest.

Since it may be a means of strengthening small communities, I see it as a legitimate event for local churches to sponsor.

Geoff Leslie, Northern Victoria

[Geoff tells me that Quambatook is most famous for being the birthplace of Australian country musician, John Williamson, and for holding an annual 'Tractor Pull'. Ed.]

The Spirit of Family Farming

Most pastors and a lot of farm families do not understand the rather unique situation of family farming.

Family farming is many things. It is, and has to be, a business. If it cannot make a profit the way it is operating, it has to be changed, or go under. We all recognise that, but many of us have not always operated that way. Sometimes we have continued to work at a certain level, or with certain crops, knowing full well that continuing on this line will lead to financial failure, meaning the loss of the farm and home.

That brings up the second thing a family farm is. It is part of the family. A family that operates a farm, then leaves the farm for whatever reason, is likely to go through a grief process not unlike a death in the family. And to avoid that loss, it is not unusual for a family to risk all to save that farm. Adult children may even give up a city job to come back and work to help save the family farm. But, just as in the human portion of the family, reason does not always hold. Putting the whole picture on computer to try to figure out what to do does not always work, because we see only what we want to see in the figures. As pastor I have seen men and women come in with stacks of papers saying they were completely past any hope of anything but bankruptcy, yet the couple was saying words like "our relationship with each other is not doing well, so we think if we can get the farm back on its feet we will do all right."

And farming is spiritual. I cannot read any of the Biblical Creation Stories without a tear in my eye for the time spent irrigating, or cultivating beets, or milking cows. God and I and the farm and my family: a powerful spiritual reality. I need to remember that, when I picture that header ditch, all those corrugations, and the canvas dams, I am picturing me at work building God's Kingdom.

Now the problem is that many pastors are appointed to serve farming communities without having a clue about the family and spiritual nature of farming itself. It makes me sad, but I have seen it time after time when appointments are made. Thanks to all who are doing what they can to bring about some resolution of the issue.

Karl Evans, Littlerock, Washington

From a dairy farm beginning Karl worked on farms for several years before entering the ministry for the United Methodist Church. He is beginning his 'retirement' after 35 years with a tour of several states holding workshops on his deepest concern "What can the local church do in the low income rural community?"

Some Features of the Emerging Ministry Landscape

Over recent years we have experienced some significant changes in the shape of church ministry, especially in rural communities. It is time to take stock a little, note some of the emerging patterns and see if our systems of training, support and communication are still appropriate.

One of the most noticeable changes is a reduction in the number of stipended clergy around the countryside. This has been a consequence of a combination of factors: rural depopulation, rural economic hardship, and a lessening appeal of the mainline churches. The effect, I suggest, has been some new learnings about what it means to be Church.

Another very significant change has been in ways in which technology affects the formation and dynamics of community. This aspect needs to be explored further, and I will leave it for another time.

Congregations are looking for new ways to carry out the functions of mission and ministry which are less reliant on local resident stipendiary ministry. And congregations are increasingly looking for ways of sustaining and enhancing local community and church in relation to local community rather than looking to centralised expressions of church and community.

The focus of discussion is shifting from "scarce resources and restructuring," to "congregations finding new structures and new kinds of ministry". Worldviews with respect to the relationship between church and community are shifting, the role and nature of stipended ministry is shifting, and the means of sustaining shared identity and belonging (community) are new.

I would like to name some of these shifts, under four headings, economic, political, social and ecclesiological.

ECONOMIC

As church communities develop forms of mission and ministry not dependent on finding stipend, allowances and housing for ordained ministry some are discovering they have newly released resources and can use their extra spending power in new ways. They now have budgets to budget with and so can ask, perhaps for the first time, questions about their mission and the relationship between their budget and their mission. Congregations are finding new meaning in their giving and their decision making. Some are showing delight in the possibilities: of changing their financial relationship with the regional and national church, of their ability to plan and support local mission initiatives, of their ability to use money to resource their own members for mission and ministry and of commitment to mission projects by the wider church.

Such economic freedom and the new possibilities it offers have the potential to re-vitalise motivation in the local church which too often has been dominated by fundraising for its own survival.

POLITICAL

Our denominations have largely organised themselves around units that support at least one stipended and ordained person. The effect of this has been that key communication and opportunities for participation in the wider church have sometimes been determined by structures of clergy deployment. Communication and representation has often been by 'parish', where parish means the economic unit that can support a stipended appointment. As congregations find and assert their identity as mission units of the church, and as the technology and methods of communication and participation become potentially more inclusive, different voices will be heard in the debates of the wider church, different issues will become visible, and new energy and gifts will be available.

Of course, this will not happen automatically or in an optimal way without intentional attention to these dynamics at both local level and by the wider church authorities. People in the new structures may not be heard and may not get on the mailing lists - they may be disenfranchised by not having their own stipended ministry.

New forms of participation are being invented and different people are getting access to the information flows. These people raise different and "naive" questions which stand to enrich and challenge the whole church.

SOCIAL (people in community)

Society has been conditioned to recognise particular indicators that the Church is present in the community. In particular church buildings and a resident minister living in a designated house and often wearing distinctive dress have provided a very visible "branding" of the church in the community. As congregations have accepted more and more responsibility for sustaining the church's mission without such visible signs of their life they are having to develop new ways of raising their profile in the community. What is our "shop window" in the community?

Many communities have not had their own resident paid ministry for years, or ever. However, church identity has then been linked to a dependent relationship with the church in a neighbouring town. The new situation is challenging local churches to own their own profile in their locality and to develop a distinctive sense of mission and relationship with their community.

Church buildings continue to be important signs of church life in many communities, but as local people make more choices about how they gather as church the focus in some places is less on formal buildings, and in some places the overheads of maintenance have also led to a move away from church buildings. As the church becomes less defined by and identified with buildings and appointed ministers it will find new and responsive ways of building its identity and reputation in the community.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL

A key theological question which is being raised by the trends identified here is that of where the church proper is to be found. In other words, does the real church exist in its local congregations or does the real church exist in some centralised or collectivised unit? Past practice has effectively defined what is real church according to criteria set centrally and largely related to a unit's ability to support stipendiary ministry and some contribution to the wider church. This has worked to define local church as somehow derivative from a centralised church structure. If a congregation or group of congregations can provide a house of sufficient standard and raise a centrally determined amount of finance to support mission and ministry, then they are allowed to have ordained ministry, and only those who have ministry which meets agreed criteria of training and remuneration are treated as real church.

Identity as 'real church' is thus at best defined from outside and linked to provision of a particular style of ministry. This can mean that individual congregations who must share with other congregations to provide ministry are not seen as fully church by themselves. It can also mean that local church can develop a sense of passivity in mission, seeing themselves as receiving and supporting ministry rather than themselves being the ministry.

As local congregations accept the call to be ministering communities they learn a new ecclesiology and challenge the understanding of what the church is, for the whole church. Church becomes where people gather to be church and the centralised structures are seen as structures to support, connect and challenge the local church, rather than provide or define local church.

"When the local congregation gathers, the whole Church is there" (Roland Allan).

Conclusion

We are experiencing a radical revitalising and re-forming of the church, especially in rural communities. Along with a social climate favouring localness of community identity and the influence of new technology and new methods for communication and community building, the shift of church away from dependence on stipendiary ordained ministry is producing some exciting and challenging new ways of being church.

It will be important for those serving the church through denominational and ecumenical structures to realise the significance of these shifts and to intentionally welcome and support the challenge to our received understanding of being church that they represent. If the structures of the church continue to support and service as normal only the 'parish' model - with the set components of residential paid ministry and derived identity - then, not only will a great opportunity for renewal be lost, but many local church communities will be impoverished by drifting outside the support,

connection and challenge that comes from belonging to the wider church.

The church cannot afford to be deaf to the new insights and questions as congregations take up their mission responsibility in new ways. Neither can congregations afford to become so self defining that they localise the gospel to the exclusion of the experience of the rest of the church. What is becoming clear is that the basis of our associated together as regional, national and ecumenical church is being challenged by the new confidence of the local church and will need to adapt radically.

Graeme Nicholas, Christchurch

Adapted from a presentation made by Graeme to the Canterbury Rural Ministry Unit in August.

Said to be from a Church Bulletin:

The sermon this morning: "Jesus walks on the water." The sermon tonight: "Searching for Jesus."



Gracious God,
As we head into the new millennium,
help us to find a balance in our lives,
to accept the changes as they come,
to retain our values,
and all that you have taught us.
May we be thankful for what we have,
strive for what we need,
and always dream about the best that might yet be.
Give us your Spirit so that each one of us
may reach our full potential,
and respect one another in love and truth;
then we will fulfil your hopes for this world,
today and always. Amen.

Shana Chandra and Danielle Evans, Diocesan School,
in *Worship 2000: Resources to Celebrate the new Millennium*
by Peter Atkins, London: HarperCollins 1999.

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