



IRCA eNews August 2026

Message from the New Chair

Dear IRCA Family

I deem it a privilege to be able to call ourselves the IRCA “family” because we are growing into the family of God ever since we came together in this way as sisters and brothers. Of course, we have Papa Dave and Mama Robyn as parent figures. Praise the Lord!

At the outset, I express my sincere thanks to all of you for asking me to be the Chair for the period 2026-2030. I am privileged to work along with Heather as my vice. Very glad to have the expanded leadership in each regional fellowship. Appreciations to Robyn and Eric, who continue to be our guiding leaders in terms of communication, finance, and secretarial. Papa David is very important for us, who keeps the history and records of our beginnings along with Lloyd Vidler and Michael Cruchley. Praise God for their nurture of our family.

I am glad that we did not miss reps from any region this time in Sibiu. Local arrangements are really done well by IRCA European leaders. Appreciations to Dean Dietrich, Roger, Lothar, and Laszlo for envisaging all our needs so meticulously. Sessions were filled with information and new knowledge about church history and faith communities. Field exposures were appropriate. “Reading the books” was inevitable. Sorry for the culture shocks. We know how to carry with us back home the needed takeaways. Appreciation to all our members for their openness and cordiality.

Special thanks to Lothar Schullerus and his beloved wife Hiltrud for fixing up appropriate contexts for the post-conference and for the loving hospitality extended to me. I am so glad that each one is sending messages of safe returns to our ministries. We will be in touch with each other and keep passing on your local news to Robyn for the e-newsletter.

Please keep praying for an appropriate venue and meaningful arrangements for the IRCA 2030 Conference.

With best wishes and regards

Prasad

Bishop BD Prasad Rao, IRCA Chair 2026-2030



IRCA 2026 Conference Group after the Closing Celebration and Ecumenical Worship

Reflecting on IRCA 2026

Late July 2026, in Sibiu, Romania, the first thing was the HEAT. But I won't talk about that... Much more interesting is the experience of rural church people, 30 face-to-face and up to 15 online, gathering from around the world. It was the first truly "hybrid" conference, and it worked. (Heather's experience with these things proved invaluable.) Proof is in the new Leadership Group, with representation from all regions, Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, and including people online participants, Ghana and from Madagascar.

Roots, Faith and Identity: People and Communities Living on the Land: We met in a land where peoples - plural - are deeply rooted locally. The

Transylvanian region is a place of many languages and difference ancestries - Old Saxon, Roma, Hungarian, German, Romania. Where te reo Māori, the original language of my country, was completely at home, in fact requested as part of the opening formalities, for the way we begin by greeting the Creator and the land, the ancestors, of the land and of those visiting, and the living - the different local peoples and those of us visiting.

Church Embedded in the Land: Communist rule proved a minor blip. Through that time, even party leaders secretly arranged for the children to be baptised in their family's faith - Orthodox if Romanian heritage, Lutheran if German, Protestant if Hungarian, and some Catholic continuing since the Reformation. Faith is connected to identity. "Eternity was born in a village." Churches from early in the second millennium provided a fortress retreat, used each time invaders ranged across Europe. They held a seed store and their walled grounds had room for livestock as well as the all the villagers.

Rural Churches Networking: This faith family enjoyed a major boost in Sibiu. Energy as if a new IRCA were born, old hands and newcomers feeling equally part of the conference process, greater diversity across the world, learning equally from one another, and knowing we can keep connected even as countries get more anxious with their borders and visas harder to secure. Of the 33 we supported through the visa process, only seven were able to attend. But include participation online and, regardless of politics in the future, we can stay well connected.

Robyn McPhail

What follows are some snippets received from others. Hopefully more to come that can be shared!

A Life Changing Experience

My name is Vincent Imai, a pastor from the rural part of Western Kenya, East Africa. It was my first time to attend an IRCA conference. It's amazing that within the two days of the pre-conference tours I already had an incredible experience and felt part and parcel of the global family serving Christ in diverse areas.

I had a first hand experience of how people in their own culture and land, can tap the God given resources at their disposal to improve their own livelihood and share the love of Christ with others by building meaningful relationships.

It was particularly a life changing experience for me to interact with a pastor who rears buffalos and uses the Buffalo milk to manufacture cheese thereby increasing his income without depending on the congregation to meet his needs.

Reflections of an Online Participant

Being part of the International Rural Churches Association (IRCA) Conference in Romania was a remarkable and enriching experience that strengthened both my Christian faith and my commitment to serving rural communities through ministry, nursing education, and leadership. The conference brought together participants from different countries, cultures, and Christian traditions, yet we were united by one purpose; to learn from one another and explore how the Church can continue to transform rural communities. Even though I participated online, I felt that I was part of the whole family. Each day challenged me to reflect more deeply on my calling and the role of faith in shaping our communities.

The opening day focused on *History and Telling Our Stories*. As participants shared their personal journeys, I realised that every individual and every community has a unique story worth telling. Although we came from different parts of the world, many of our experiences were remarkably similar. Rural communities everywhere face challenges, yet they are also places where faith, resilience, and hope flourish.

Sharing my story as a nurse educator, Principal of the College of Nursing and Midwifery, Kwapong, and an ordained minister from Ghana gave me the opportunity to explain how I integrate nursing education with Christian ministry. I reflected on my passion for mentoring nursing students to become compassionate healthcare professionals who serve with excellence and Christ-like love. I was encouraged to discover that many participants were equally committed to serving their communities through education, healthcare, agriculture, and church ministry.

The day's discussions reminded me that Christian unity grows when we listen to one another's stories with humility and openness. Our different backgrounds enrich rather than divide us, and together we become stronger in fulfilling God's mission.

The theme *Faith, Culture and Identity* challenged me to reflect on the foundation of my life and ministry. Before becoming a nurse, educator, researcher, Principal, wife, or minister, I belong to Jesus Christ. Every other role I fulfil is an assignment entrusted to me by God.

Listening to participants from different cultures helped me appreciate both the beauty and diversity of God's creation. Although our traditions differ, our shared identity in Christ unites us. I reflected on the rich values within Ghanaian culture—respect, hospitality, communal living, and caring for one another—and recognised how these values are strengthened when shaped by the Gospel.

This session also reaffirmed my conviction that faith should never be separated from professional life. As a nurse educator, I believe nursing is more than a

profession; it is a ministry of compassion, healing, and service. Likewise, leadership, teaching, and research become meaningful when they are guided by Christian values and directed towards improving the lives of others.

The discussions on land, home, and global issues resonated deeply with me because they reflected many realities facing rural Ghana. Conversations about environmental stewardship, climate change, food insecurity, migration, poverty, and access to healthcare reminded me that these challenges are shared across many nations.

Serving in a rural nursing college has shown me how limited infrastructure, inadequate learning resources, shortages of healthcare professionals, and migration continue to affect rural communities. Many young nurses leave for urban centres or abroad in search of better opportunities, leaving already vulnerable communities with even fewer healthcare workers.

The conference reinforced my belief that meaningful transformation requires partnership. Churches, educational institutions, healthcare providers, governments, and communities must work together to address these challenges. Rural churches continue to provide hope, spiritual care, and practical support, while nursing education prepares professionals who can serve with competence, compassion, and integrity. The words of Galatians 6:2, "*Carry each other's burdens,*" became a powerful reminder that our shared responsibility extends beyond national borders.

The final day was marked by ecumenical worship, fellowship, and thanksgiving. Worshipping alongside Christians from different denominations and countries was a powerful expression of the unity of the Body of Christ. Although our traditions varied, our shared faith in Jesus Christ brought us together in prayer, praise, and fellowship.

Throughout the conference, I also encountered beautiful cultural expressions such as the Fijian greeting *Bula*, meaning "life" or "good life," and the Indian song at the closing ceremony *Sharanam*, meaning "refuge" or "shelter." These reminded me that people across cultures seek peace, belonging, and hope. As Christians, we find our ultimate refuge and abundant life in Christ, who calls us to extend His love and compassion to others.

I am sincerely grateful to the organisers, especially Robyn, whose thoughtful communication, prompt responses, and warm hospitality made every participant feel welcomed and valued. The dedication of the organisers contributed greatly to the success of the conference and created an atmosphere of genuine Christian fellowship.

Rev Dr Mercy Kokuro Braimah

Below: Mercy receiving her Indian shawl as symbol of IRCA Leadership Team. Presented by Eric on his return to Ghana, another IRCA Africa rep, along with Ratovohery Jean from Madagascar



IRCA 2026 Resources

Material from IRCA 2026 in Sibiu, Romania, is available on the website on the conference page.

Go to irca.online/irca-conference-2026/

[Opening](#) and [Closing](#) Worship in the Neppendorf Evangelical Church next door to the Academy was livestreamed and are available as public videos on our IRCA youtube page.

Videos of keynote addresses and panel participants have been linked to the conference page for easy access.

You can use these for your own study and reflection or set up a group and working through material together.

The Oceania region are doing that in early October - gathering in person and online to study material of interest and work through it in relation to their own contexts.

New IRCA Leadership

Built on Regional Representation

The 2026 IRCA conference in Romania appointed the IRCA Leadership Group for the coming four years until the next conference. Once key roles were put in place, the rest of the group was based on those put forward by each of the IRCA Regions. As a result we have a leadership that is widely representative, something that was possible because of the spread of participants, in Sibiu and on-line, with only Europe providing a larger number than the other regions.

The full group can be seen at irca.online/leadership-group/



New Chair Bishop Prasad Rao and Immediate Past Chair Dr Heather Major will work together to share the load that goes with the role.

Prasad's appointment completes a circle from his involvement with the first conference under the name of IRCA in South India in 2002. Prasad convened conference local arrangements under the umbrella of the Church of South India, providing a memorable experience and

gracious hospitality. His appointment as Chair 24 years later was received with acclaim.

The conference was delighted that Heather was clearly willing to continue to serve and in the role of immediate past chair is able to play an ongoing part in leadership. Thank you, Heather, for your sterling service, past and future!

We are also very grateful that Rev Eric Skillings is willing to do another term combining Secretary and Treasurer tasks, a combination which suits him and links well with his role in the United Church Rural Ministry Network in Canada.

Communications has now become a team effort - with Rev Dr Robyn McPhail being joined by Pastor Irena Stefanova. Read about her on the [IRCA Europe page](#).

The two enjoyed travelling the farewell journey from Sibiu to Bucharest - see below, with Heather and Vincent also in the photo.



Regional Representatives

IRCA Africa

Contact person: Mercy Kokuro

Rev Dr Mercy Kokuro is deputy founder and general overseer of Most High International Ministry, Jachie, in the Bosomtwe district under the Ashanti region

of Ghana. She is also Vice Principal and Head of Academics at the College of Nursing and Midwifery in Kwapong.

Pastor Ratovohery Jean pastors an independent and evangelical church called Centre Alpha located in Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar.

Eric Adjei Amankwah is Lead Pastor of House of Prayer Assemblies of God in Ghana.

IRCA Americas

Contact person: [Eric Skillings](#)

Papa Dave Ruesink, USA, is IRCA Leadership emeritus and historian.

Rev Inba Joshua Inbarasu, USA, is minister with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and serves a small Swedish immigrant congregation in Iowa along with three other shared ministry/co- operative parishes.

Rev Eric Skillings, Canada, is minister with the United Church of Canada in South Western Ontario.

Rev Catherine Christie, Canada, is a retired minister of the United Church of Canada (35 years in service).

IRCA Asia

Contact person: **Stephen Joseph**

Bishop Stephen Joseph, India, is founder with his wife Susan of the Indian Evangelical Church (IEC)

Bishop Prabhu Jebamani, India, is Bishop of Mumbai in the Church of North India

IRCA Europe

Contact person: **Irena Stefanova**

Rev Matt Jeffrey, UK, Chair of IRCA Europe and CEO of the Arthur Rank Centre

Rev Irena Stefanova, Bulgaria/North Macedonia, is Secretary for IRCA Europe

Rev Martin Lothar Shullerus IRCA Leadership Emeritus (Legacy Holder)

Treasurer – to be appointed

Eastern Europe Section

Contact person: Ilona Szokacs Nagy

Rev Dietrich Galter is Vice-Chair of IRCA Europe and Chair of the Eastern Europe section

Rev Ilona Szokacs Nagy, Romania, is secretary for the Eastern Europe section.

Rev Márk László Gyula, Romania, is Hungarian representative and a Transylvanian Reformed pastor.

Vas Jozsef, Romania, is youth representative.

Orthodox representative – to be appointed

IRCA Oceania

Contact person: Robyn McPhail

Wessley Manasa Vatanitawake, Fiji, worships at Anand Methodist Church, has extensive media experience, and is working with his local community in empowering women and youths.

Rev Myrah Topo, Solomon Islands, is a local church pastor with the Wesleyan Methodist church of Solomon Islands.

Rev Dr Robyn McPhail, Aotearoa New Zealand, attends to Communications for IRCA Leadership and guides and encourages the IRCA Oceania Working Group in growing the network and keeping well connected.

Stories to Share

From Sprint to Marathon

When our two Comms people first met and got talking about living on the land, Irena started sharing her experience with gardening and Robyn knew at once there was a story here....

I have always been a city person until the day I was relocated to another country, and to the small village of Raklish in North Macedonia.

The church where I serve and live has a very small yard, split between the front section facing the street, where the entrance to the property is, and a small garden in the back. My husband and I have always believed that one of a church's most important sermons is the state of its property, because it reveals the heart's posture of its believers toward God. So while my husband worked on renovating the parsonage, I started work on the churchyard.

The church had gone without a pastor for more than six years, and none of the members had kept up the yard, so my first job was clearing weeds and shrubs as tall as I am. Since I still didn't know the plants well, I probably pulled up a few perennial flowers along the way, but the rose bushes were impossible to mistake, so thankfully I managed to protect them from myself 🙄

In the front, I made a small meadow, planted lavender and sage along one fence, and small raspberry bushes along the other. In the backyard, I also planted a row of table grapes.

I waited three and a half years before I finally tasted raspberry fruit this summer.





Patience and care are worth it, and the satisfaction of seeing the fruit of your labour is indescribable. God has shown me, and keeps showing me, in remarkable ways how things unfold in His kingdom. Through creation, He was preparing me for the kind of work waiting for me in the village.

The difference between working in a city context and a village one is like the difference between a sprint and a marathon — it takes patience, waiting, listening, and building relationships.

Back to the garden. I heard what people in the village were saying. The common belief is that if a woman doesn't have a vegetable garden, she isn't "useful." So I first set about clearing the backyard of the church. Amid all the other tasks of restoring a scattered congregation, I spent dozens of hours watching YouTube videos of people moving from city life to the countryside. I applied many of their ideas, and made plenty of mistakes of my own.

I built an improvised woven fence out of branches to enclose a compost area. My husband built raised beds for the vegetables to come, and later added lids for them. I filled the beds with compost and mulched them with cardboard while I looked for straw. Somewhere between the big cleanup and repainting furniture, I started seedlings of spinach, lettuce, and herbs, and then three varieties of tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers, and eggplant.

I drew a detailed map of my small garden and planned the sequence for planting everything. As a result, we didn't buy vegetables all summer, and I made more than thirty jars of tomato pasta sauce.



I want to tell you about my garden neighbour, too. In the photo above, behind the wire fence, you can see her large yard and her vegetable greenhouse.

I already mentioned that work in a village context is a marathon, and I mentioned the importance of listening, but there is one more important piece: building relationships. The fence between my vegetable garden and my neighbor's is a wire fence. I soon discovered that I wasn't the only one who found her garden the best place for morning coffee. That woman probably had no intention of becoming friends with the Bulgarian pastor, but somewhere between planning the next task, pulling weeds, and coffee, a genuine friendship quietly took root between us. I asked her questions about growing vegetables, about pests, about anything that could offer the safety of neutral conversation. A fragile trust was built, enough for her to let her granddaughter join the local children's camp I organised for the village's children during Easter break.

At first, my strange-to-her mulching methods were a source of puzzlement bordering on mockery. But when temperatures reached 52°C (126°F), her tomatoes turned yellow and stopped bearing their sweet fruit, while mine enjoyed the moisture hidden beneath the cardboard and kept producing more and more. By the end of summer, I received high praise from her: "Maybe there's something to this mulching after all."

I'm left with a few lessons from God. I've been talking to you about the plants in my garden and about myself, but you'll understand that this is really about God and His church, about a pastor and the congregation entrusted to her.

The first and most important lesson is a marathon mindset, paired with building trust and long patience.

The second came from the sheer amount of weeds appearing out of nowhere. No one plants weeds, but they can choke good plants if not removed in time, and tending to plants has a satisfying end.

The next lesson is about timing in field work. You cannot skip a single act of care, because it might prove fatal for the plants. Watering and shade netting are two kinds of work that don't allow delay.

The last lesson (for now) is about continuity in the work of God. Our work is always done with the next generation in mind, too. The fruit of the raspberry

bushes and the grapevine will keep bringing joy, both to the congregation and to the family of the next pastor, because I have already received an appointment to another village church to love just as much as I love this one.

Pastor Irena Stefanova,

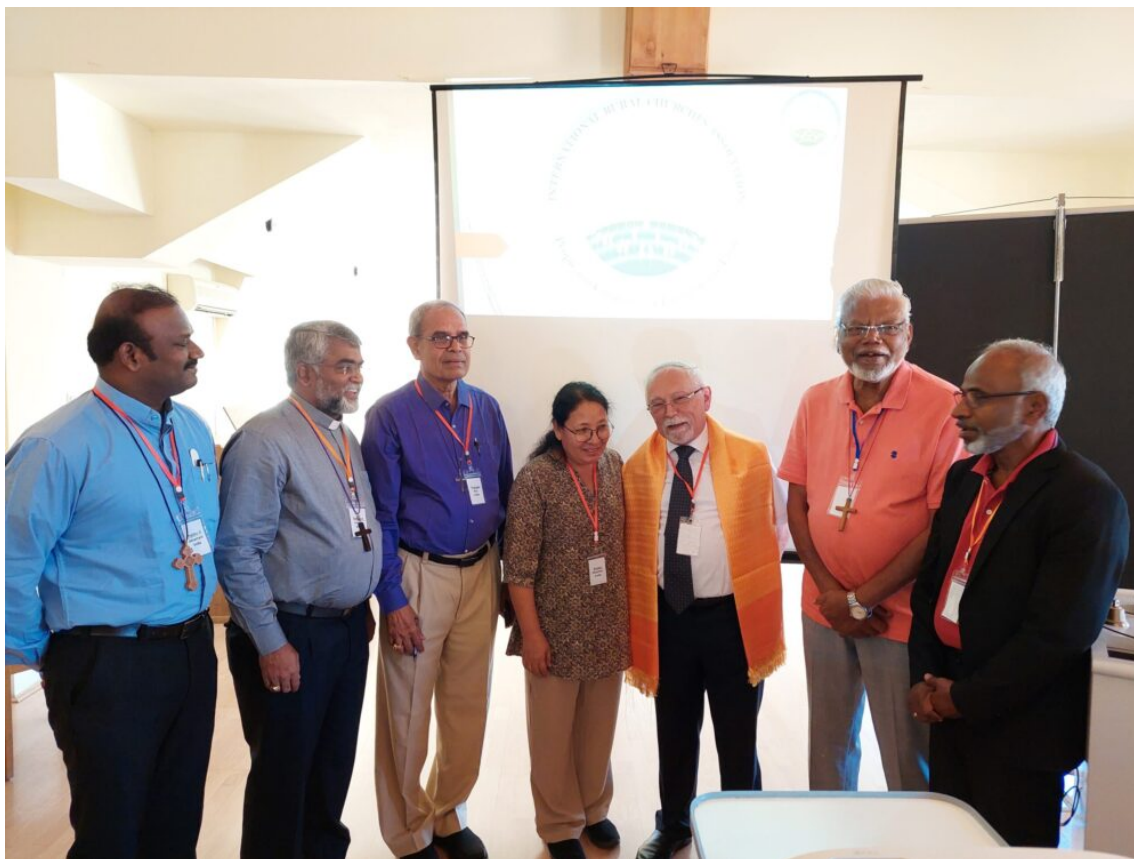
Raklish village, North Macedonia



Pre-Conference Group at KIDA, Ilienii



Conference in Session at the Academy, Sibiu



Indian tradition of honouring continues ... Lothar receives a shawl
after his keynote



"A Mighty Fortress is our God" Recital by Matthias in the Fortress Church at Cristien



Conference Group at Cristien alongside the "Plague Pulpit", where the priest safely carried out the last rites prior to burial of plague victims



Orthodox Church in Sibiel



Icon in the museum in Sibiel



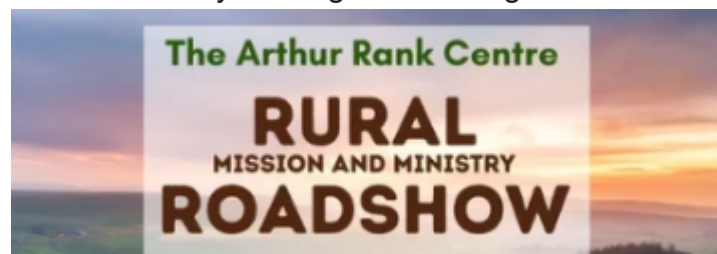
Mediasch



Dietrich Leading Sunday Worship at Martinsberg

Links of Interest

In June the Arthur Rank Centre in the UK held a [Pilot Roadshow](#). A reflection on this first event can be found by clicking on the image.



The [Winter edition of Ruminations](#), published by Saltbush - Uniting the Scattered Community in NSW, Australia, is available on-line. Click on the image to access the pdf download or flip-book to read on-line.



The [June edition](#) of the United Church Rural Ministry Network in Canada is available by clicking on the image below.



A network of people with a passion for rural communities, based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ

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