Review article

Reality and hopefulness

Challenges and possibilities for rural churches

Don Saines


In the Boyer Lectures of 2001, the historian Geoffrey Blainey made the following observation:

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Smaller towns fear for their future. Many have recently lost their bank, their only hairdressing shop and clothes store, and even their football team – once the pride of the district and the focus of all loyalties. One doctor, living in a farming town which holds 900 people, tells me he will almost certainly be that town's last doctor. Nobody will be found to replace him.¹

There is no doubt that many rural and remote communities in Australia are facing social and economic challenges. To this we must also add environmental issues and the certainty of climate change. This is a trend mirrored in rural areas around the world with our ever-increasing movement toward urbanisation and efficiencies of scale.

This is also the context and the challenge for the church in rural Australia. The challenges are, however, not only economic, social and ecological. Rural Australia is also facing 'the abandonment of Christian faith' and diminishing church attendance. On average, the proportion of Australians identifying as Christian declined by 7 percent between 1996 and 2006 and the number of Anglicans in rural Australia fell by 1.6 percent, though the variation in the percentage of people who identified with a Christian denomination during this same period varies across rural Australia. The highest identification was +6.8% in Queensland and the lowest was -11.3% and -10.3% in the Northern Territory and Tasmania respectively.²

These are some of the realities that are reported in the recent publications from the Christian Research Association (CRA) entitled Models of Leadership and Organisation in Anglican Churches in Rural Australia and Sowing and Nurturing: Challenges and Possibilities for Rural Churches. The reports offer a summary of research findings from across the church in rural Australia. As well as presenting us with sobering realities, the reports also found hopefulness for the church in its faithful service and innovative ministry.

Sowing and Nurturing: Challenges and Possibilities for Rural Churches is written as a 'primer' for rural community and rural church life more generally. Models of Leadership and Organization in Anglican Churches in Rural Australia is written as an overview of Anglican rural churches with a focus on particular Anglican parishes across Australia as examples of varied approaches to leadership and organization.³ It is important to note that, as
the writers suggest, the purpose of the reports is to offer 'a brief summary'. They are not to be read prescriptively but as options 'presented to stimulate discussion, generate ideas and encourage reflection on the nature and life of the rural churches in relation to their mission' (SN, p. 3). And it is to this end that this present review is written.

While some aspects are duplicated within both reports they complement each other well and it is helpful to read both as there are details particular to each. *Sowing and Nurturing* is the more comprehensive of these two reports and offers helpful commentary arising out of wider research and reflection. It also briefly situates the rural church within its social and economic context and within the wider cultural context that is reflected across much of the Western world including urban Australia. Rural Australians are not isolated from the experience of secularisation and postmodernity. Helpfully, and in the face of these realities, *Sowing and Nurturing* begins with a brief reminder of our *raison d'être*, our reason for being church and having a missionary faith in these changing and challenging times in rural Australia.

The valuable heart of *Sowing and Nurturing* is the discussion of findings about leadership and the developing models of ministry. Highlighting the key role of leadership (SN pp.11, 22–23), the reported variations and developments in models of ministry are hopeful signs of vitality in the rural churches. Lest we lose heart, these are models that have already helped revitalise rural churches in small but real ways, as people of faith have responded to local need and the call of God to ministry. Strengths and 'challenges' are helpfully listed under each model (SN, pp. 12–18).

Most of the ministry models listed have parallels with the experience of rural Anglican churches. However, in the second report, *Models of Leadership and Organization in Anglican Churches in Rural Australia*, the ministry models are enfleshed, as it were, as they speak of actual parish case studies where women and men have gathered together to collaborate toward creative and sustainable ministry. The models are taken from around the Anglican Church of Australia and range through stipended full-time ministry, ecumenical cooperation, enabler-supported ministry, large-area team ministry with multiple parishes and ministry leadership teams. (MLO, pp. 4–8). Strengths and challenges are also outlined and given more helpful content (MLO, pp. 9–12).

These trends toward collaborative ministry are mirrored in the wider Anglican Communion. These developing ministry models have arisen
across the Communion due in part to a cultural postmodern and postco­
lonial hierarchical suspicion that has gone hand-in-glove with a desire for
relationality and community. These collaborative ministry models also
come from a reading of scripture. They parallel the experience of the early
church and the cultural pluralism that is also our common experience today.
It is a model known in Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant churches.
But there is also something in this approach that sits well with the rural
ethos where communal existence necessitates shared living, in spite of
the tradition of rugged individualism. Rural people are very aware of their
interdependence (SN, p. 25).

Here we must also recognise that the rural church has often led the
way in its implementation of the models spoken about in these reports. The
need to be innovative in ministry has perhaps arisen sooner in rural and
remote regions than in more populous and prosperous urban centres – or
perhaps the innovations are different. In this regard the rural church has many
parallels with the church in the two-thirds world and with the faithful but
under-resourced churches of Africa and Latin America. It is not surprising
therefore to see that one of the models suggested by Sowing and Nurturing
is the ‘Base Ecclesial Communities’ model (SN, p. 18). These CRA findings
speak of the importance and value of small churches and of small group
life. It is possible that small groups meeting as house churches may be the
way ahead for many. It will be helpful for rural church congregations to
read about these models in both reports, not for the sake of copying but to
expand ideas and feed the imagination.

At this point I must also express some dissatisfaction. The examples of
‘fresh expressions of rural church life’ in Sowing and Nurturing are drawn
from the UK. And yet the Anglican examples (and there will be similar
examples from other denominations) could have been highlighted as in
part ‘fresh expressions.’ The Anglican example of the ‘Company of the Good
Shepherd’ in the Diocese of Bathurst is an excellent example of a tradition
turned around and made relevant and ‘fresh’ to the time and place. But
importantly, this was a model that worked with what was at hand. This is a
common trait, a necessity, of rural life.

The complex nature of rural community means that there is no simple
solution to the restoration of faith and church membership. Here I want
to underscore the social and cultural reality briefly outlined by these CRA
reports. Perhaps more than any faith communities in Australia, rural churches
live in a complexity of social and environmental change and face, in some situations, the ongoing diminishment of population and agricultural or forestry output. Those who are members of the church in places such as the coal-mining communities of the NSW Hunter Valley or the forestry towns of south-eastern NSW live in the invidious position of having to advocate for local industry and employment while learning about the need for reducing carbon emissions in order to reduce global warming. What kind of Christian spirituality and leadership is required here?

Theological reflection and the spiritual formation of the men and women who live in the face of these realities is therefore a key task for our churches. The CRA reports rightly impress upon us the need for training, and while pragmatic and practical faith is often the tenor of a rural spirituality, the complexities of rural experience will often require capacities to think and dream beyond our usual local experience. For Anglicans there are also some ominous predictions made under the heading 'Signs of Hope': 'In none of the churches we visited was there strong evidence the church would still be there in another 20 years, or even five to ten years in some case ... there is need for radical thinking' (MLO, p. 14).

In my view Christian formation is the continuing need in the face of such huge issues. Reference in Sowing and Nurturing to the Base Ecclesial Communities as one important model of ministry is very appropriate given their focus on small groups gathered to read the scriptures in their context. This activity will be increasingly vital for rural churches to implement. But so too is the process of social analysis, which is also a key aspect of this model. Social analysis is important for it helps us understand the broader context, how we fit in and why we are where we are, so as to prevent us having too narrow a perspective about our rural community and the God whose love invites us toward a costly discipleship.

This is especially the case when, for many churches, decline will continue to be their experience. Sustainability is not a new question for rural Australians or for the rural church. The myth of agricultural abundance is in many areas of rural Australia challenged by a more common experience of drought and death, even in the heart of Australian agriculture, the wheat lands of NSW, Victoria and Western Australia. In her chapter in Anglicanism in Australia, Ruth Frappell writes of the influence of the rural myth upon the development of rural dioceses: ‘The rural myth declared that the country rode on the sheep’s back’ and as a result few acknowledged the depopulation of rural
Australia in the early twentieth century. Within the Anglican Church we have as a result inherited 'under-resourced inland dioceses.'

In matters of church decline it is too easy for us to blame our leaders or our rural traditions for declining membership and to make easy suggestions. While now several decades old, Kenneth Dempsey's findings from his study of a local Methodist church in the 1950s and 1960s remain an important reminder when we start to get too critical. Dempsey found that comments made by clergy, their wives and church members often suggested that the blame for the decline in the church was due to one or other group within the church, for one reason or another – a clergyman was a poor preacher, or did not visit, or could not relate or held ideas that did not sit with country folk; the laity were not committed, were too dependent on the expert or better-educated clergyman and so on. But Dempsey does not find that these issues or attitudes in and of themselves provided the overall answer for the decline. Rather, Dempsey points out that the experience of conflict and decline in that period was not unique to that congregation or indeed to rural congregations generally. Decline was not due to 'the shortcomings of ministers, local laymen or the [organisational structure]' but was more the product of external changes – geographical and social mobility, social recognition and leisure activity beyond the church and the church's inability to give convincing answers to questions raised by the widespread and profound human suffering of the twentieth century. The expansion of the communications industry has only added to these external influences.

Both Sowing and Nurturing and Models of Leadership and Organization in Anglican Churches in Rural Australia give us valuable insight into the rural church and into some of the ways faithful men and women are participating together in ministry. Faith and life will continue though changes and developments and some closures will occur. We now need to take these invaluable reports further and deeper theologically and ecclesially while not for one moment forgetting that we have a mission before us. In this regard and in the face of our present rural context we will always need a reminder of our raison d'être, our reason for being church and having a missionary faith. As the recent water crisis across eastern Australia has made us aware, these are also faith and life matters that affect all Australians. Reality and hope are the two sides of the coin that is the church in rural and regional Australia and represent the value of these two recent CRA publications.
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Notes


