

Rural Ministry Forum Nagambie 2025

When the Presbytery of North East Victoria issued the invitation for representatives of rural Presbyteries to come together we had in mind two things:

- a conversation around shared resourcing; and
- some ongoing conversation about being the church in a rural context in what is for the church, a time disruption and upheaval.

In lots of ways what is written in this paper has been driven by my conviction that the church, in its strategic planning, has not explored the cultural context or looked to itself, nor has there been a recognition that approaches may need to be different in rural areas. In this paper I will begin to explore that circumstance acknowledging that much deeper work can and should be done. What I am saying here will need to be considered within the Synod strategic plan which I think is broad enough to allow us to do what we need to do.

Recognising what we are facing in the very near future

Any glance at the demographics of the church, especially in the rural context, will tell us with exacting clarity that within the next 3-5 years (and sooner in many places) Uniting Church congregations will fall off a precipice. Many will disappear entirely and others will have a tiny remnant, unable to function in the manner in which the church has functioned for the past 50 years. We can fold our tents and fade into the night, or we can attempt to position ourselves to ride the waves of change. To even attempt such an audacious thing, we need to clearly understand what is happening to the church and to the broader culture and to find new ways to speak and fresh ways to make connections for a timeless gospel needed now as much, and perhaps more, than ever. The theological question, as ever, is what saves us and as much as ever, perhaps more than ever, that question is what saves us from ourselves.

I have spent a great deal of my own life reflecting on the first chapters of Genesis which, in my view, presents the most amazing, insightful, thorough exploration of the human condition. It lays out not just the perception of something other than ourselves, that we name God, but the great human need of something other than ourselves, often for our survival. It offers the clear-eyed recognition of human faults and failings and at the same time offers insight into human potential for greatness, measured by a different measure to the one that commonly defines greatness.

As a starting place we need to take hold of *our truth* that the life of the spirit, the life of the soul, when neglected, leads to chaos and destruction. We need to take hold *our truth* that the gospel of Jesus, the way of Jesus, helps us to a balanced and healthy life not just for us as individuals but for the whole creation. What is there about the story, what aspect of the story, what angle or starting place in the story of human relationship with the holy other is good news for today. How do we tell that story effectively, and what organisational shape

best supports that work in this time and place. My suspicion is we need a few more Pauls and Timothys, Columba's or Romeros and people of the ilk of Greta Thunberg.

Ironically, we need them in a church community that would, on the whole, disapprove of them as disruptive. My suspicion also is that in rural settings we need structures that are lighter than the institutional church, alongside or growing out of the institutional church.

Understanding our time and place.

Rural Australia has changed over the past 50 years. In reality, that change has been going on for longer, but the rate of change has accelerated in the past 50 years. The way that rural Australia looks, the way that rural Australians think, the way that we go about things has changed and, on the whole, the church has not kept pace. Where changes have been instituted in the church, they have been changes aimed at keeping things the same. The priest and parish model of church remains but without the priest.

It is interesting to note that the Uniting Church arrived on the scene at about the time that a monumental shift in the broader culture, affecting every aspect of life, began to gather speed. Many of the things that the Uniting Church has valued about itself, things that helped us to bring denominations together, are now a burden to the church. We have recognised, if a little late, that our system of governance is exhausting, leaving us with little energy for the real work of the church - our participation with Christ in the furthering of the kingdom of God. What follows is a snapshot of some of the changes that have taken place as a background to some thinking about the adaptive challenges we face and some more vigorous approaches that may help us faithfully ride the waves of change.

Changes in the rural landscape

In the colonial development of Victoria, horses were changed at about every 10 miles and so little villages grew around these staging places. For example, along the Old Hume Highway there is roughly 10-12 miles between Seymour, Avenel, Locksley, Longwood and Euroa. Once railways were built there was much the same pattern of towns at regular intervals to service the needs of rail traffic. Away from major roads and rail links, towns grew to service the needs of farming communities, again based on an easy distance for horse drawn vehicles.

Prior to, and in conjunction with early village and town development, church buildings were constructed in the corner of farming properties so that the distance travelled was manageable. These farm corner churches were often associated with particular families. Around Yarrawonga, for example, there are quite a number of historic plaques marking the site of farm corner churches, that to us seem very close together. There are now only one or two of these farm corner churches left in the Presbytery of North East Victoria.

Over time, particularly in the period after WWI when the motor vehicle became more common, some of the "10 mile towns" stagnated - Locksley and Longwood and Avenel for example - and some disappeared. Other centres, generally about 30 miles apart grew as service towns accessible by car. Myrtleford, Euroa and Tatura are examples of 30 mile towns.

Progressively, as automobiles evolved, a small number of rural centres, about 100 miles apart grew even larger. Shepparton and Albury/Wodonga are examples of these centres which have now become largely self-generating and no longer totally reliant on the surrounding farming properties for their existence. Ten-mile towns have almost gone, and thirty-mile towns are under threat from continuing depopulation and the falling value of agricultural production.

Other types of development, such as cheap by comparison retirement housing, has bolstered some centres. Nagambie, Avenel and to a degree Echuca are examples of growth through retirement housing, although Echuca has also positioned itself as a tourist centre. The same could be said for a number of towns along the Murray who have experienced a tourist and retirement housing resurgence.

In the Presbytery of North East Victoria we are dealing with the legacy of a large number of congregations in 30 mile towns where the population (and the congregation) is no longer capable of financially supporting a full time stipended person, if one were available, but most do not want to let go of the priest and parish model of church that has been the only model they have known for their whole lives.

Changes in the way that Australians, including rural Australians think about themselves.

In his book, *The Way We Are*, the social researcher, Hugh MacKay, described Australia in the first part of the 21C as *"a rather troubled, wounded society; more lonely, more anxious, more depressed than ever; more medicated; more deprived; more gambling addicted; more economically unequal. In many ways we seemed unsure of ourselves – still fighting old battles over ethnicity, gender, religion and politics, becoming more aggressively individualistic, and placing ever-stricter boundaries around 'acceptable' attitudes and values while seeming powerless to address such relatively simple problems as homelessness and poverty..."* MacKay went on to highlight the shadow side of Australian life including the treatment of asylum seekers and first nations people. On the positive side, he pointed to an ongoing commitment to acts of kindness, social harmony and an understanding of the need for community and connectedness.

The decline in religious affiliation

The Australian Bureau of Census and Statistics has provided a snapshot of Australian religious affiliation. In the 2021 Census 39% of the population, indicated they had no religion. Of those claiming religious affiliation 43.9% represent as Christian, Islam 3.2%, Hindu 2.7% and Buddhist 2.4%. There is an obvious disconnect between religious affiliation which is cultural, and religious practice, for those nominating as Christian. These statistics are not represented in churches.

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute when exploring religion and social cohesion in Australia found that only China, Japan and New Zealand had a higher proportion of people who said the religion was not at all important to them.

When religiosity was mapped (whatever religiosity means) less than 5 percent say they are *very religious* and the *very religious* are concentrated in Pentecostal or charismatic churches.

The same survey found women were more religious than men, religious practice increased with age and amongst those born overseas where English was a second language and amongst households with dependent children.

Interestingly people living in remote parts of Australia had 52% lower odds of being religious compared with people in major cities and regional areas and there was no statistical difference between people with or without a university education. People with friends from diverse ethnic backgrounds had higher odds of being religious (9 or more - 64%)

Not surprisingly the Uniting Church is amongst those who score highly as volunteers and in engagement in civic life but, surprisingly perhaps, we do not score as well in a measure of acceptance of difference. Government assistance for ethnic minorities or relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, were given as examples. People of no religion and people of other religions scored measurably higher. With this in mind it would be interesting to map resistance to acknowledgement of country in our congregations.

The way that we go about things.

There is an old saying: *there is not much you can't fix with a pair of plyers and a piece of number 8 fencing wire*. It's a reference to the resourcefulness and ingenuity of rural people working with what they have at hand. It is a nod to their creative approaches to problem solving and their pride in these things. This *No 8 fencing wire* character trait is something that could help us as we navigate the changes that are taking place.

Just such resourcefulness and ingenuity is reflected in the adaptive approach taken by some small rural businesses as they have navigated change. As 30-mile towns have become smaller, work has become more mobile. If you live in Nagambie for example, your television technician/data person is likely to come from Violet Town, your painter from Murchison or Mooroopna, your dentist from Melbourne, your podiatrist from Avenel.

A truck, a mobile phone, a part-time surgery are all part of making a living now in rural Victoria. Where banks and churches have closed or withdrawn services, vacating the field, others have seen an opportunity to do things differently. A ute and a mobile phone have replaced a shop and a number of part time surgeries have replaced a resident practitioner. Technology though patchy is ever increasing the opportunities for people to access services without long travel. In these and in many other ways rural people are able to respond to the challenges they face. Technically these are called adaptive challenges that have called for adaptive change.

Adaptive Change

In some sense, as a church, we have begun to make adaptive changes, but as I have already said they are more in the way of an effort to keep things the same – the priest and parish model, the minister and congregation model - just without the minister. Lay people, leaders of congregations have stepped up, but the model for church has not changed.

I don't want to disparage the efforts of those lay people who have stepped up, they are wonderful, but we have reached the point where those lay leaders are beginning to feel their age and to recognise the fact that there is no following generation, no succession plan possible. We have failed to adequately address basic questions about ourselves in a timely way.

We now have consolidated wealth, albeit now at the disposal of a few, but if we do not have vibrant, sustainable, transformational congregations then wealth is immaterial. We need to talk about what makes vibrant, sustainable, transformational congregations, and indeed what constitutes a congregation in these changing times and we need to create points of connection with generations not now represented in Uniting Church communities. We need to be targeted and we need to be light and that calls for a different way of going about things.

To help its thinking, a recent diocesan conference in south Florida was offered the contrasting images of a corporate farm and a community garden. The corporate farm grows a limited number of uniform crops and flourishes on policy, procedures and systems which seems a fair description of the Uniting Church overall. Over against this was offered the image of a community garden, obviously smaller, with all sorts of different plants growing alongside each other in a small space. The community garden image can help us to imagine one way the church might look in regional centres for example, offering lots of entry point possibilities, different congregations under the one roof.

From my own family history there is the contrasting image of the paddle steamer and the flat-bottomed skiff used by professional fishers on the Murray. Steamers of various sizes operated up and down the river, delivering supplies and moving produce and people. A skiff, with one or two people, could work parts of a river system where no steamer could go. The image of the mother ship and small fishing boats or canoes is not unheard of and offers the concept of a central location supporting lots of small congregations which may in effect be the size of what we have traditionally thought of as small groups.

We no longer live in a one size fits all world

It feels like I am mixing metaphors, but should we be adopting that tradie and truck model or the paddle steamer and the skiff model or perhaps both. We need individuals able to do the job and to survive in an environment where the population is not dense, but we also need the supply chain. To stretch the metaphors even further we need to encourage adventurous people who like our Celtic ancestors, are willing to put their little boats on the water not knowing where they will end up, but trusting the wind of the Spirit to take them where it will. In a sense we need self-starters and self-supporters.

Some losses along the way

At its beginning the Uniting Church pointed to Worship, Witness and Service as its defining motif. In the intervening period, in a very real sense, witness and service have been disconnected from worship.

In the evangelical v liberals wars, which were really all about how we view the bible, the liberals won the battle but lost the war in the sense that the church lost the evangel, the burning desire to see others share what we have.

With the growth of Uniting (with all sorts of good and necessary reasons around that growth), we have lost the conviction that we are here to serve our communities from our hearts and with our own two hands as a response to the love of God for us. The point of connection for the church has been lost. Local communities have lost a sense of purpose.

Anecdotally, there is also a sense among many of the younger cohort of people who have left the church *that we do not practice what we preach*. If we look at the statistics is interesting to note that in the things measured by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute when exploring religion and social cohesion, those practicing a religion scored more highly than others in their sense of belonging and their pride in the 'Australian' way of life and culture which in rural areas is born out politically. We say one thing and do another. The addition of the lesser score in acceptance of difference adds support to this argument.

Some possible ways forward.

To be a little crass we need to consider questions of content and packaging. If just on half of the Australian population is open to the idea of religious life and most of those still have a sense of connection to Christianity but are not represented in practice, we have to consider that we are not *meeting the market*, that people aren't *buying what we are selling*. We are coming out of the era dominated by a serious sense of personal sinfulness. I don't know many people outside the church suffering from a serious sense of personal sinfulness to which the church may give relief. If anything, it is the church that has been fostering that sense of personal sinfulness that others are just not buying. What, for example, would be the response if we were to bring our understanding of God and God's desire for and relationship with the creation to the fore? What would be the response if our focus shifted from sexual behaviour and human difference to the very real threat to the environment on which we all depend?

We are now generations away from the ascendancy of the written word and logic. Our culture has become aural and oral, perhaps in that order. We are responding out of feelings rather than logic, something that is reflected in the attraction of charismatic and oddly orthodox traditions, both of which are currently bridging the age and the culture gap. What would bridging that gap that look like for us without losing integrity and authenticity?

In the Presbytery of North East Victoria we are beginning to experiment with all these things. At the south of our Presbytery, at Seymour we have been planning and are now working through the establishment/re-establishment of a congregation in Seymour. We are hopeful of a team of lay and ordained, volunteer and paid leadership who will first of all

create a community. As a second stage we will be looking at how that team might lead the support of existing communities in surrounding towns and villages and or work in those communities to grow something new. We know it will be small. We are looking to the truck and tradie model and the paddle steamer and fishing skiff model, trying to find ways of being the church in a context which has changed.

We have some sense of how this might work in that the Presbytery leadership team made up of lay and ordained, volunteer and paid people from various centres across the Presbytery already functions in the way we imagine for the South.

We have invited people to gather because we recognise that we are not alone and that everyone is doing and trying something with the same conviction that in Jesus we have a way that brings out the best of our humanity.

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at the Presbytery of North East Victoria