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# **Rural Churches in the Uniting Church in South Australia: Models for Ministry**

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## Introduction

Within rural Australia, a range of patterns of ministry has emerged as declining and ageing populations, increasing costs and limited availability of full-time ordained clergy have forced congregations to re-think how effective ministry can be conducted. In many places, small churches operate in clusters. In others, ecumenical partnerships have been formed. In many places non-ordained leaders have replaced ordained leaders. Sometimes teams have taken the place of individuals in responsibility for church life.

Lay leadership teams have exercised ministry in rural Uniting churches in South Australia for more than ten years. Thus, it was decided to look at how they were faring. Have lay teams taken church life in new directions or have they continued the leader-oriented patterns of the past? Where do the teams currently turn for support, and what are the resources they need to be effective in their lay leadership roles? How are the rural congregations relating to their communities?

The more general research question can be rephrased as follows: do different organisational structures and leadership patterns contribute to differences in the wellbeing or vitality of church life, in the wellbeing of the leaders themselves, and in the contributions that local churches are making to the wider community?

This paper reports on the rural Uniting churches in South Australia. This is one of a series of studies on rural churches in Australia conducted by the Christian Research Association in conjunction with NCLS which is contributing to understanding the bigger picture of rural churches in Australia.

## Methodology

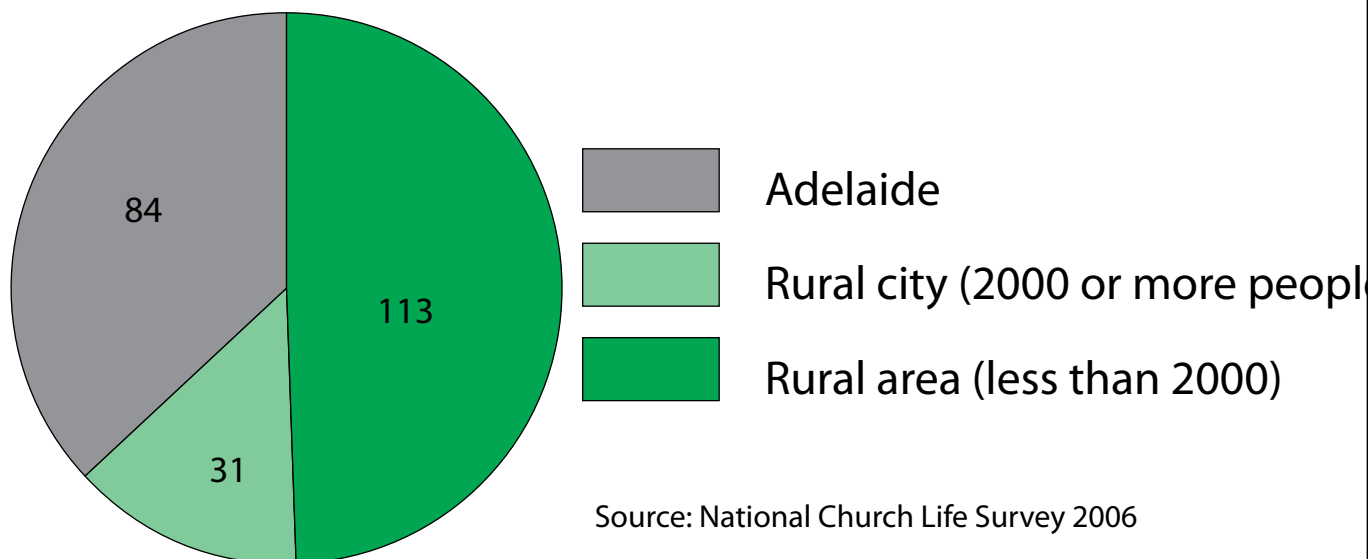
Two major sources of information have been used in this study: the National Church Life Survey (NCLS 2006) and a series of case studies. National Census data also provided some insights into the situation.

The NCLS provided the basis for generalisations to be made across the churches about the various structures and patterns of leadership and organisation, and the wellbeing of churches and their contributions to the wellbeing of their communities.

The Christian Research Association (CRA) conducted eleven case-studies in a range of churches in different parts of rural South Australia. The case studies sought to capture the stories of individual churches and to examine at depth the particular factors operating in each situation. In the case studies, the researchers spent a few days in the locality. They participated in Sunday services, conducted focus groups, and interviewed individual lay leaders, clergy, and members of lay leadership teams. The researchers also interviewed leaders in the local community, including leaders of churches of other denominations. They observed the communities: their services and facilities, enabling them to put the ministry of the church into the context of the local community.

In addition to these case studies, interviews were conducted with some key people working with the rural churches in South Australia, including the three Rural Mission Planners.

Figure 1. Number of Uniting Churches in South Australia by Locality



## Overview of the Uniting Church in Rural South Australia

The National Population and Housing Census (2006) reported that there were nearly one and a half million people (1,499,771) living in South Australia. A little less than half a million (404,349) people lived outside Adelaide. South Australia has few large rural cities. The largest of them is Mt Gambier which had a population of about 23,000. Most rural towns in South Australia have a population of less than 10,000 people.

The population in South Australia grew slowly in the ten years from 1996 to 2006: in Adelaide it grew by 5.2 per cent, and the population outside Adelaide by 6.0 per cent. Rural population growth has been quite uneven, mainly as a result of the availability of employment. The population has declined in most wheat and sheep farming areas while some mining areas have seen increases. There have also been increases in retirement and holiday centres.

A very high proportion of the rural population was born in Australia (83%). Rural areas contained a higher proportion of Indigenous people than Adelaide, but they amounted to only 3.2 per cent of the total rural population.

The rural areas have higher proportions of children than does Adelaide. However, rural South Australia has a lower proportion of young people aged 20 to 24 as many of them leave rural areas for tertiary education and employment. There are higher proportions of people over the age of 75 in Adelaide than in the rural areas. Some

rural people retire to the city, sometimes because of the health facilities, sometimes to be close to their children.

The Uniting Church is the third largest denomination in South Australia. In 2006, almost 10 per cent of the South Australian population identified themselves with the Uniting Church. The Uniting Church is much stronger in terms of identification in rural areas (14.1% of the population) than in Adelaide (8.3%). It is numerically strongest in the 45 to 64 age group, significantly weaker below the age of 44, and weakest in the 25 to 34 age group. However, the numbers identifying with the Uniting Church have been declining at every age level. In South Australia, as a whole, the decline was 21.4 per cent between 1996 and 2006, greater in Adelaide than in rural areas.

Of the 237 Uniting churches in South Australia which took part in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) 2006, 63 per cent were in rural areas. In fact, close to half of all the churches were in rural centres of less than 2,000 people as shown in the Figure 1.

### Patterns of organisation, leadership and support

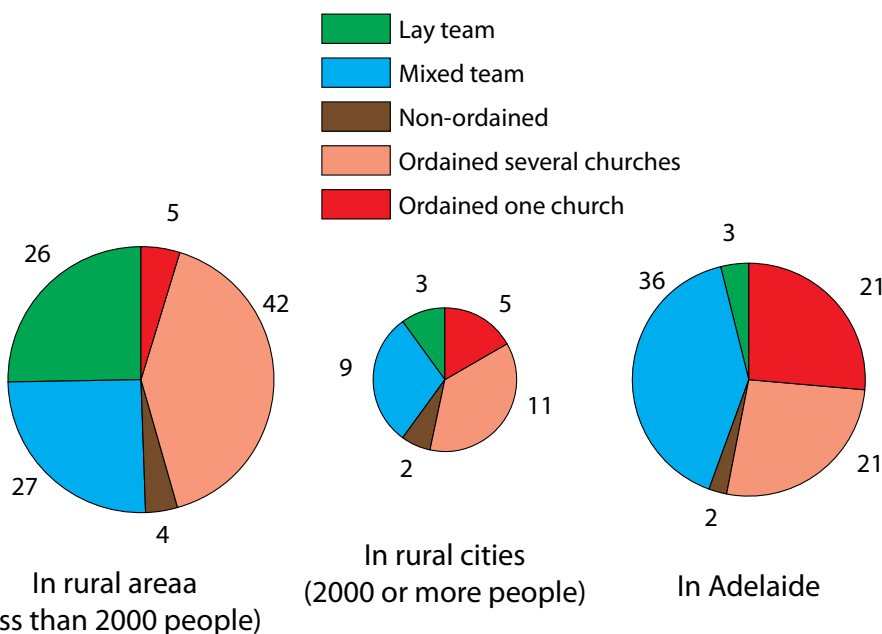
#### Leadership

Figure 2 shows that of the 228 Uniting churches that responded to the question, 105 (46%) were served by ordained ministers. However, out of the 55 churches outside Adelaide served by an ordained minister, in just 10 cases, that person served one church (mostly in the large rural cities), in 12 cases they served two churches and in 33 cases they served three or more churches. In Adelaide, by comparison, 50 per cent of the ordained ministers served just one church.

In many cases, ordained ministers worked with others (pictured as 'mixed teams' in figure 2. In the rural areas, most of these teams are groups of lay people. In the cities, they may be other employed people such as youth workers.

As a general rule, where churches had only non-ordained leaders, whether working singly or as part of a lay team, the leaders only worked in one congregation.

Figure 2. Leadership Arrangements in Uniting Churches in South Australia by Locality



Note: Size of the pie reflects the different numbers of churches in each locality. The numbers by each segment are the numbers of Uniting Churches with this pattern of leadership.

Source: NCLS 2006.

A number of churches reported in the NCLS surveys that the teams leading the church had increased in size in recent years. However, many also reported that they had moved from ordained leadership to lay leadership, or from a single leader to sharing leadership with another church. within the last five years.

**Organisation**

Churches work with each other in various ways. While many operate individually, in other places a major church serves one or more satellite churches. Frequently in rural areas, churches work as equal partners in a ‘cluster’. In a couple of cases in South Australia, a Uniting congregation is joined with one or more congregations of other denominational affiliations in an ecumenical cluster.

In the five years from 2001 to 2006, the major change in organisational patterns occurring in smaller rural centres was the increasing clustering of small churches.

Few Uniting churches had planted another church in the last five years. However, some churches in the bigger population centres had started new congregations for specific community groups, such as ethnic or distinct age groups, or had added special services for newcomers.

**Ecumenical Activity**

Rural churches collaborated ecumenically much more than city churches did in South Australia. While it

is not uncommon for churches everywhere to get together for special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, 15 per cent of churches outside Adelaide had monthly services with churches of other denominations compared with only two per cent in Adelaide.

**Wellbeing of church, leaders and contributions to community**

In evaluating the impact of these different patterns of leadership and organisation, three groups of measures were used.

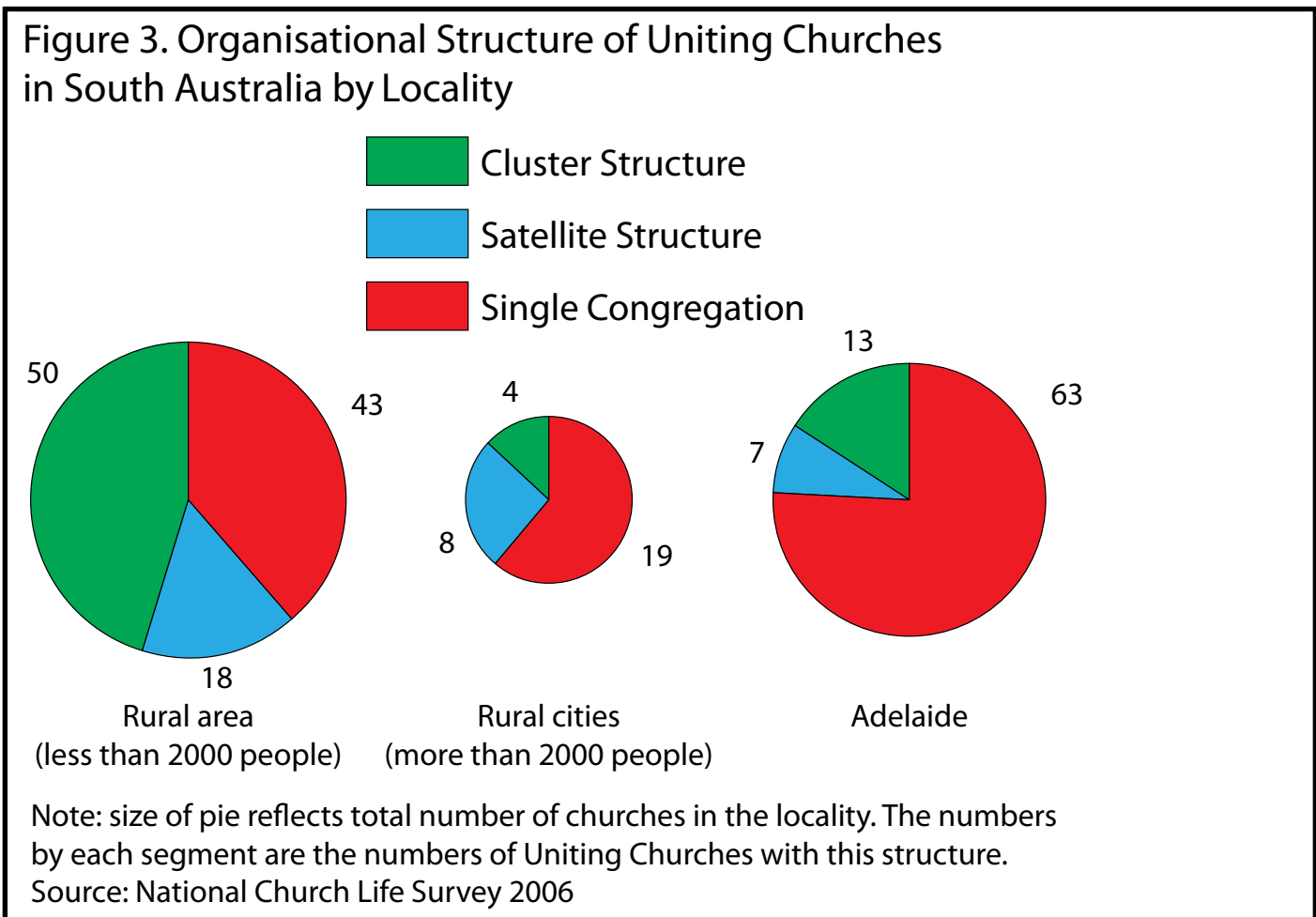
1. The wellbeing or vitality of congregational life
2. The wellbeing of the leaders
3. The contributions that the congregation is making to the wider community.

The NCLS data provided some measures of the quality of congregational life. The wellbeing of leaders and the contributions of the church to the wider community were examined mostly through the case studies.

**The Wellbeing or Vitality of Congregational Life**

Identifying areas of vitality in church life is a theological task, which involves considering why the church exists. However, it must also take into account the context of the church’s community and location.

**Numerical growth** is often used to measure church vitality, but in so doing one must also take into account



the changing demographics or socio-economic landscape of the area. For example, one cannot expect attendance numbers to grow if the area's population is in decline. Counting the number of *new people* attending the church can also be used but relying on this as a measure of vitality, too, can be misleading, as it may be indicative that a church is offering popular entertainment rather than leading people to commitment in faith.

Another measure is the breadth of the *age profile* of the congregation. While some congregations are set up in the context of, say, an aged care facility, generally, engagement with a range of age groups is a sign that the church is communicating with the various sectors of the population.

The data for rural South Australian Uniting churches suggests that churches in sparsely populated areas were declining most rapidly, probably because of the rate of population decline in these areas. In fact, the rates of decline in different localities were not statistically significant. Neither were the differences in percentage of newcomers into the congregation or the age profiles of congregations.

A vital and healthy church has a *sense of community* to which people feel they want to belong. The sense of belonging was stronger in the larger rural service centres, the rural cities and in Adelaide than in the small rural towns and less populated rural areas. This may reflect the struggles that some of the small rural churches are having to keep alive. It may also reflect the different place that these churches have in their respective communities. In the city, the church is often the centre of people's sense of community, or is one community of interest alongside, but overlapping little with other communities of interest. In rural areas, the church provides the moral foundation for communal life, but people met each other in a variety of contexts, not just in the church. The church is thus one part of their experience of community.

Another sign that people feel they are part of a congregation is that they report that they are *encouraged to use their skills and abilities* within the congregation. Attenders in Adelaide churches reported that encouragement more commonly than did attenders rural churches. They may be because larger city churches had a greater variety of activities in which people could be involved and because many rural people use their skills and abilities within the wider community.

The feeling among attenders that they are *growing in faith* through the congregation can also signal a healthy church. However, 'growth in faith' is not language that all church attenders understand or with which they feel comfortable. Some feel that faith simply 'is'. It is the framework in which they operate rather than being a feeling that may grow or diminish, so the lack of growth is not necessarily something negative. A very significant part of the life of a church is its *worship*. Another positive sign of church

vitality is that people feel that services are inspiring. The proportion of the church attenders indicating they were experiencing much growth in faith through the congregation was not statistically different in the larger localities and in Adelaide compared to rural areas. However, the proportion of the congregation who always found the services inspiring was significantly higher in the larger localities and in Adelaide than in the small rural areas.

The NCLS has maintained that a church which is functioning well as an *organisation has a vision that is clear and which is owned by those who are part of the congregation*. Having a clear and owned vision has been found by the NCLS to be one of the best predictors of overall vitality and health (Kaldor 1997: 141). The church with a vision is a church which has a direction. On the other hand, it is also important that structures are in place to ensure that the details of the on-going functions of church life happen. A final measure of the vitality of church life is whether people feel that their congregations are ready to try new things, or are *open to innovation*. Affirmation of this quality suggests that people are not tied too much to particular ways of doing things, but are flexible and ready to respond to changing situations.

There was a significant difference in the extent to which people were affirming that they were committed to a clear, owned vision. The affirmation was weaker in most rural areas than in Adelaide. With declining numbers and ageing congregations, it is hard to affirm strongly a vision for the future of smaller rural churches.

Overall, the differences in the vitality of the churches in different locality types were slight. Nevertheless, there was greater decline and less vision for the future in small rural areas. In areas where the population was less than 2000 people, there was a lower level of belonging. In the cities, there was a higher affirmation that the services were inspiring, but there were similar levels in the affirmation of growth in faith and in community involvement.

### *The Contribution of the Congregation to the Community*

The contribution of congregations to their community was examined largely through the case studies. Evidence was sought in the programs and activities that the church offered to the community. Also noted was the extent to which individual congregation members were active in the community and felt that they were supported by the church in that activity.

In his detailed study of the impact of the church in an Australian rural community, Rol Mitchell notes that many contributions of the church are not clearly visible to the members of the wider community. Further, the church was often "applauded for its contribution to 'the moral structure' of the community" (Mitchell 2005: 221-223). Some general comments on the contribution of the congregation

to the community were sought from both the members of the congregations and from community leaders.

However, the NCLS had a few measures of how church attenders related to their wider community. Included in the NCLS measures was a scale to measure *informal helping*, which measured the extent to which church attenders were helping other people. Another measure of engagement with people outside the church was whether church attenders were *inviting other people to the church*. The fact that they are inviting them is a sign that they feel positive about the church. It is also a sign that they are seeking ways in which they can make a difference to the lives of their neighbours.

The NCLS has measured the extent to which people in the church are engaged through the church in community activities. This measure does not necessarily work well in the rural churches, because a high proportion of people in rural communities are active in the life of their communities.

Hence, the church is one of their community activities rather than being the main agent for their community involvement.

There were no differences from one locality type to another in the extent to which people were helping each other in informal ways such as hospital visiting, supporting people through personal crises, lending money to people as well as giving to charities and volunteering in charitable organisations.

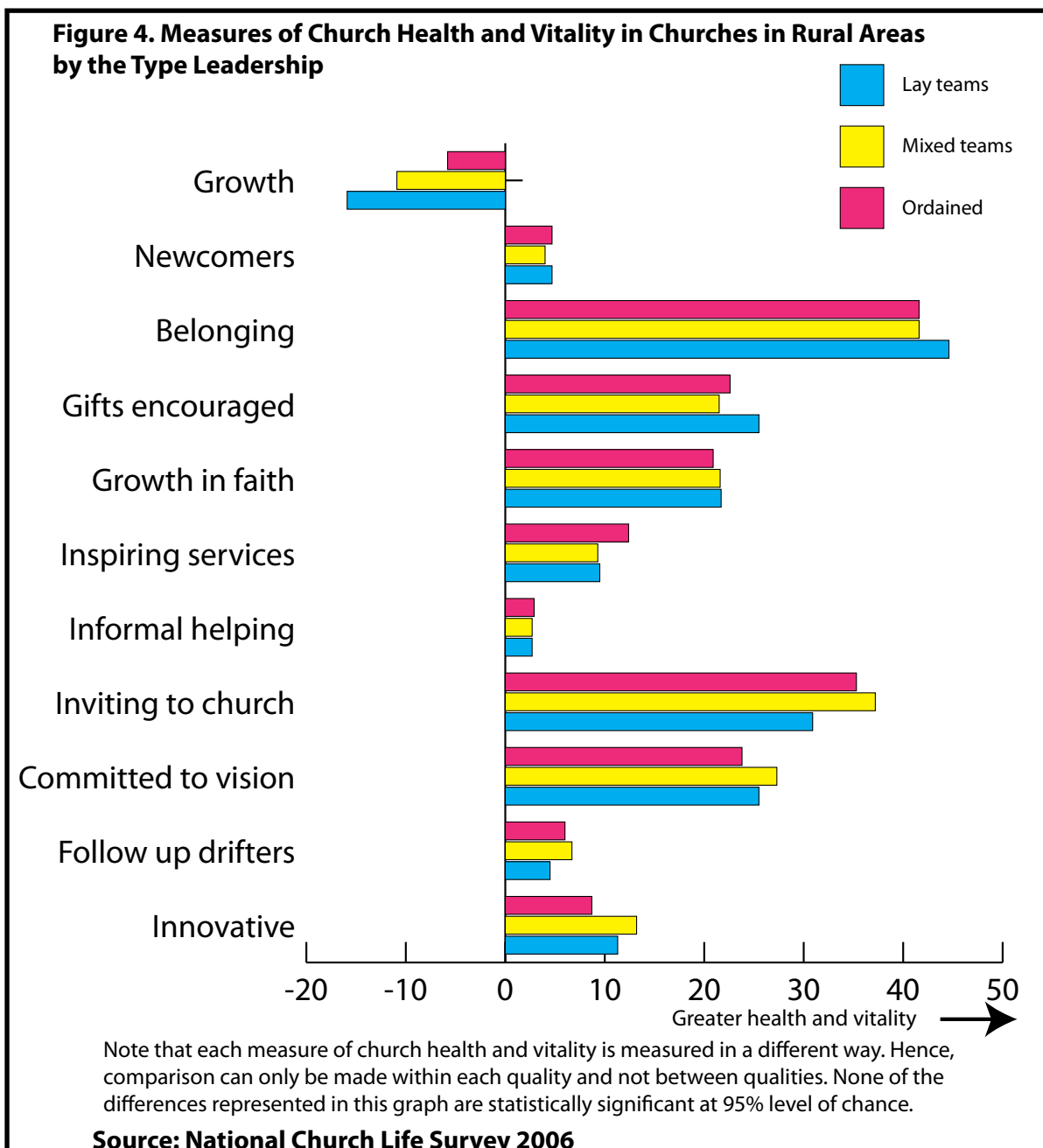
There was a difference in the extent to which people were inviting others into their churches. This occurred more in smaller rural communities than the large rural communities or in Adelaide. The willingness to invite may indicate that people are confident about their churches and concerned for others. However, it may also relate to the ways in which churches are functioning in their communities. In small rural areas, where everyone knows each other well, it can be easier to extend an invitation. It is very common in small rural communities for people to support each other in their respective church events,

especially special occasions such as Easter and Christmas.

### Impact of Structural Forms and Leadership on Vitality

The key issue for this study is whether church structural forms or leadership patterns have any impact on the vitality of churches? Does it matter whether churches are part of a cluster or work on their own? Does it matter if they have an ordained minister or a team of lay people leading them?

Experience suggests there are many factors





likely to have a significant impact on church vitality that cannot be measured easily in survey research. For example, every church knows that the personal qualities of a leader can make a huge difference. Individual attenders who do not have a recognised position in the church can make a considerable difference to its life and sense of vitality.

The NCLS results suggest that the structures and patterns of leadership made little difference to the sense of growth in faith or to the outward expression of faith in serving others, or in attenders inviting others to the church as shown in figure 4.

While there were insufficient single lay leaders or lay pastors to make statistical generalisations or to validly include in figure 4, those churches led by lay pastors appeared to be doing exceptionally well. Single lay leaders seemed to be able to develop a vision and to encourage their churches to try new things more readily than did ordained leaders. The results suggested that perhaps these lay leaders were fitting into the churches better and relating more positively to their congregations than most ordained leaders. It is possible that the fact that many of these leaders were rural people might have assisted in that process.

Differences in organisational patterns, as shown in figure 5, demonstrated more differences than did differences in patterns of leadership.

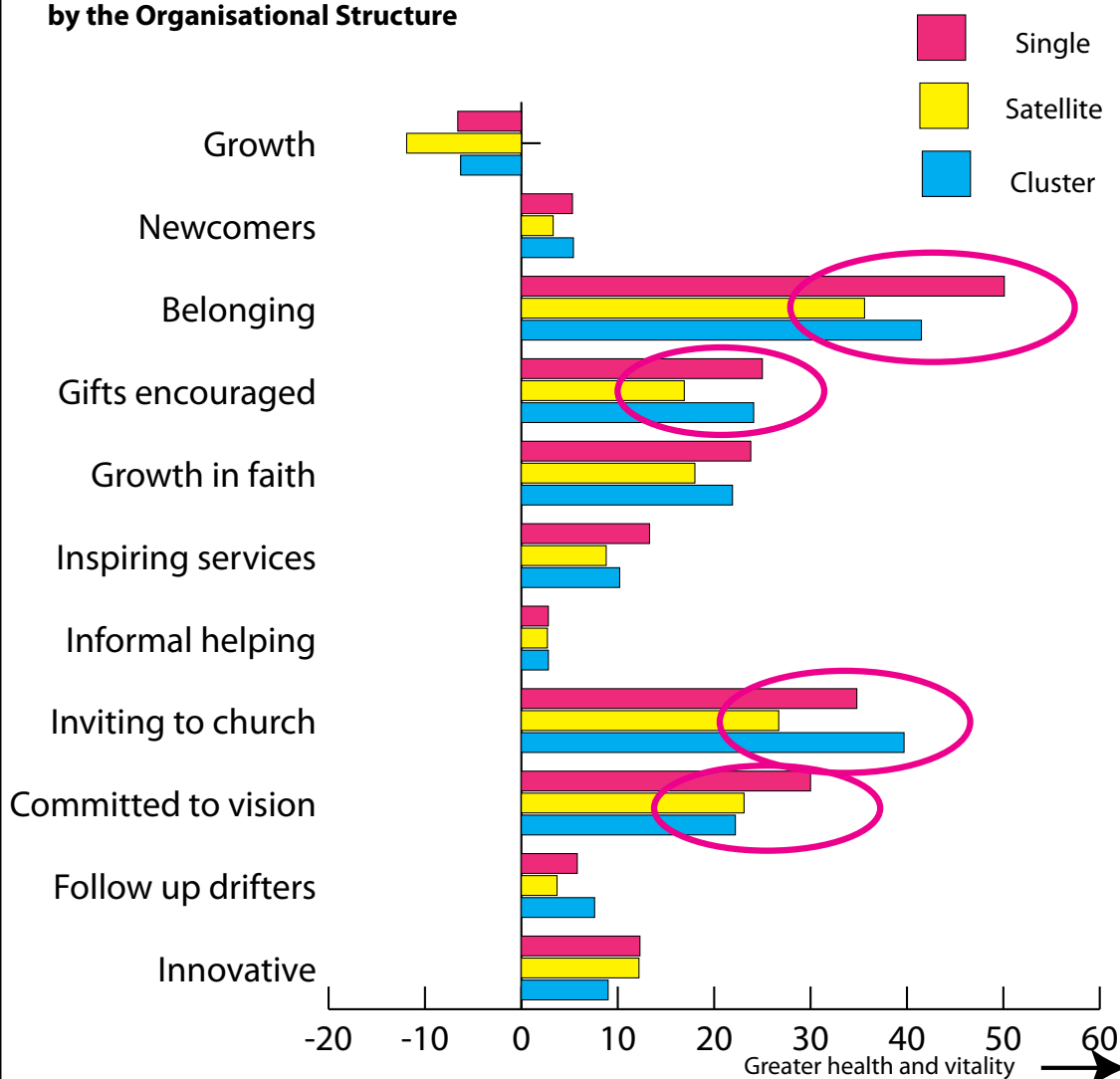
Single churches with their own office bearers showed greater strength of belonging and had a strong sense of vision. The people who meet together week by week take greater responsibility for their own life

than do attenders of churches in clusters. This sense of responsibility for the life of the church is weakest when the church is run by another larger church, as is the case in satellite churches. Indeed, the major churches seem to be 'pulled down' in their vitality by the satellite congregations.

In most respects, the levels of ecumenical cooperation between congregations neither contributes to the vitality of congregations, nor diminishes it. However, in the churches which collaborated with other churches ecumenically for worship at least monthly, 28 per cent of the attenders reported much growth in faith compared with just 18 per cent of the attenders in congregations which never engaged in joint worship services.

These findings, however, must be reviewed now in the light of the case studies. They must also be considered within the wider context not only of the internal functioning of the church but also of the activity of the church in the wider community.

**Figure 5. Measures of Church Health and Vitality in Churches in Rural Areas by the Organisational Structure**



Note that each measure of church health and vitality is measured in a different way. Hence, comparison can only be made within each quality and not between qualities. Differences in this graph statistically significant at 95% level of chance are represented by ellipses.

**Source: National Church Life Survey 2006**

## Case Study 1: Crystal Brook Uniting Church

### *The Community*

Crystal Brook, a town of over 1500 people located 200 kilometres north of Adelaide, is a service centre in the heart of some of South Australia's most productive sheep and wheat country. The town's council is now amalgamated with that of the much larger town of Port Pirie. The last two years have been difficult because of the drought's cumulative effects. In the future, Crystal Brook may become a large retirement village or a suburb of Port Pirie. While its population has declined in recent years, the town will not die, but it will need more housing and better use of town land, together with more facilities for young people, if it is to stay vital.

In terms of religious identification, nearly a quarter of those living in the town described themselves as being Uniting Church. Smaller proportions identified themselves as Catholic or 'no religion'. Anglican and Lutheran numbers were smaller again. None of the denominations has a minister who lives in the town. There are, however, largely good ecumenical relations, with the four denominations cooperating to provide religious education at the local school as well as running a children's club. Evidence of the church in the wider community is often seen through the activities of members as individuals as well as through church groups. The existence of the church is perceived as helping to provide a moral foundation for the wider community despite the low church attendance figures.

### *Crystal Brook Uniting Church Congregation*

The rapidly aging congregation is reflected in the substantial rise in the number of retirees and significant fall in the numbers of employed people attending the Uniting Church.

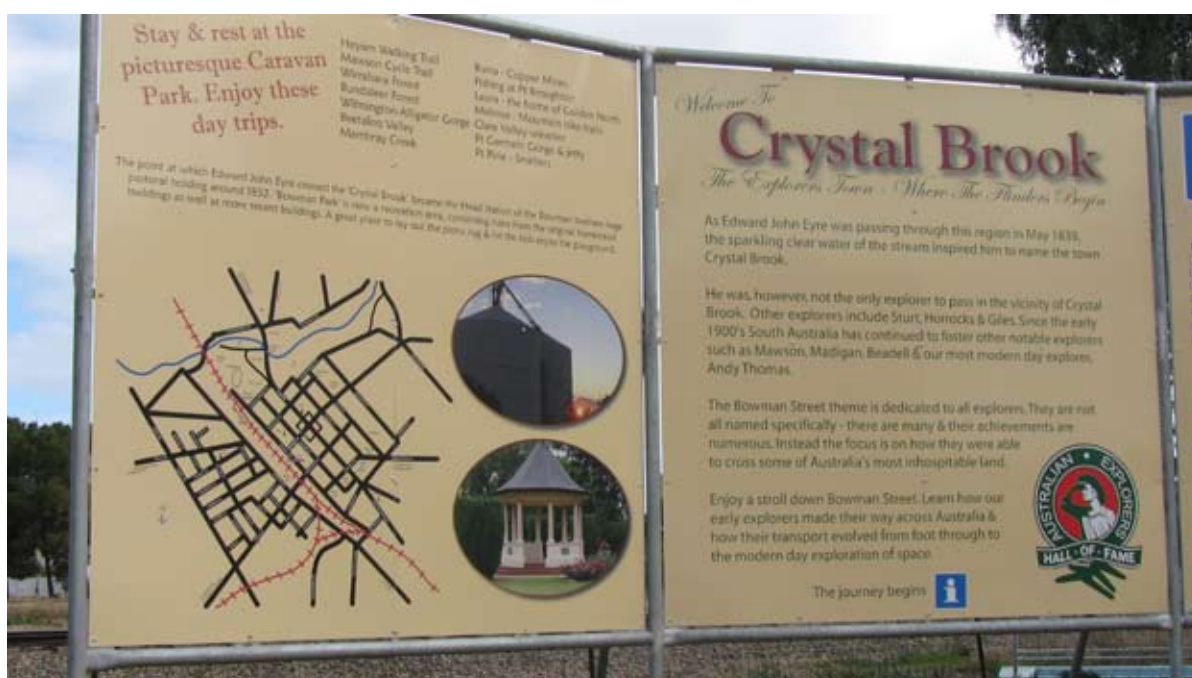
Those in the community identifying with the Uniting Church fell by 18 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

For some years, Crystal Brook had a full-time minister, but now limited church funds could only support a half-time minister – if one was

available. The congregation is working on a model of team lay ministry. This was initially very challenging but, through a process of discernment, the congregation has fully taken up the challenge, begun planning and taking action for the future. The comment was made that dependence on paid, ordained minister is "not how God wants it to be". Crystal Brook's leadership team is now made up of seven to eight members in their 50s and early 60s. Older members were somewhat reluctant to volunteer as many felt they have done their 'bit'. There is a roster for lay ministry, which includes four or five lay preachers, and all are involved in worship tasks. While most members affirmed the ministry of the lay team, some felt that, compared with ordained ministers, lay people lacked depth in their theological understanding which impacted on the quality of teaching in sermons.

On the whole, members of the leadership team enjoyed their roles, and the team appeared to be working well together. As a group, it has the necessary complement of skills for ministry, the opportunity to do a variety of tasks in leading and serving, and is able to 'go with the flow'. However, the team is stretched time-wise.

Few looked to the Network for support and people found it hard to maintain interest in the Network, largely due to the distances between those churches involved. Nevertheless, some believed the concept was better than the old Presbytery system for providing support, encouragement, and the sharing of faith, resources and ideas.





## *Case Study 2:* **Kingston SE Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Kingston SE is on the South East coast of South Australia and approximately 300 km from Adelaide. It is a fishing port and holiday town and has a population of around 1,500 people. The district's demographic is changing: it has an aging population, farm hands are being brought in from overseas, and there is an increase in the number of off-farm retirees. Drought is making life difficult for those on the land.

The Kingston community was described as willing to come together on important projects and having a sense of pride in its town. The infrastructure of the town was updated in the 1980s. The Kingston District Council appears to be well regarded by the community and interacts positively with the local churches.

In terms of religious identification, nearly one quarter of the population of Kingston described themselves as being Uniting Church. The next largest group was 'no religion' followed by Anglican, Catholic, with smaller numbers of Lutheran and Pentecostal. There are many individuals in the Uniting congregation who are involved in community groups as individuals, and the church, itself, is well regarded for its service in the community. However, apart from the Uniting Church, the other denominations are struggling with small numbers and elderly congregations. Relationships between denominations has improved, and ecumenical activity is increasing with the encouragement of the Uniting Church.

### *Kingston Uniting Church Congregation*

Compared to the wider community, the congregation is aging faster. The proportion of retirees is higher than the region. The total population of the region grew by nearly ten per cent between 2001 and 2006 and the numbers identifying with Uniting Church grew at a similar rate.

There was some resentment towards lay leadership when the Uniting congregation lost its charismatic minister to another denomination in Kingston. However, lay preachers were soon accepted and, indeed, appreciated by the congregation. The ministry team was made up of ten people, including the team leader and administrator. The team worked fairly well together, meeting formally monthly and informally once a week. Generally, they felt they had the range of skills needed for effective ministry. Interviewees from other denominations described the Uniting lay leadership team as being particularly strong. The ministry team was, however, having to address some issues with the help of the area resource minister. Vision and leadership were important

qualities upon which the team felt it needed to focus.

The congregation had a part-time administrator who played a valuable role in helping the church run smoothly and freeing up others to pursue non-administrative tasks.

Ideally, the congregation would like an ordained minister but one with a job description which allowed lay people to take more responsibility than in the past. However, lack of funds has meant lay leadership is currently seen as the only option if the Uniting Church is to continue in Kingston. The benefits of lay people taking responsibility were reported as 'improved and empowered faith development'.

## *Case Study 3:* **Lock Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

The small town of Lock, with a population of around 300 people, is in the centre of the Eyre Peninsula. It is 600 kilometres from Adelaide and about 75 kilometres south of Wudinna which is on the the main highway between Adelaide and Perth. Lock's median age was a little lower than the average for South Australia.

Drought has hit the local economy and farms are being consolidated, contributing to a decline in population numbers. Iron ore was discovered 20 kilometres south and may provide the basis of a mining operation from 2008, but the contribution to community life is expected to be small.

In terms of religious identification, over 30 per cent identified as belonging to the Uniting Church in 2006, well ahead of Catholic, Lutheran and 'no religion'. There were four churches in the town: Lutheran, Catholic, a Free Presbyterian Church and the Uniting Church. There was a high rate of church attendance in the area. Apart from the Free Presbyterian Church, the churches of Lock have had a long history of cooperation. There have been some discussions about an ecumenical partnership between the Uniting Church and the Lutheran Church.

### *Lock Uniting Church Congregation*

The Uniting Church had an ordained minister living outside the town, with responsibility also for three other congregations. He took a service in Lock about once a month, but came to town most weeks. Other services were taken by lay preachers mostly from congregations in the parish cluster. The minister took religious education sessions at the local school and was well-known and respected in the church and wider community.

The Lock congregation had a younger age profile than many rural Uniting Churches. The level of educational qualifications was high and most members were employed. It was common for people to leave the area upon retirement, partly because of poor health facilities in the immediate area. Hence,

there were few lay leaders with the availability of time provided by retirement.

Members have high levels of involvement in the church and their local community. The contribution of the church to the community was largely in providing opportunities for worship, fellowship, and pastoral care. There was also recognition in the wider community of the work of the church with children and young people.

Administration of the church is primarily in the hands of a representative council of the parish, which includes representatives of each of the four congregations in the cluster. The Council meets every six weeks. Within the local congregation of Lock itself, organisation is looser, but there are several capable leaders. There were about five people in the Lock congregation who led services and preached from time to time. There was general agreement that the leadership encouraged people to use their gifts and talents. At the time of the case-study the Lock congregation served the whole area through its lay preachers and those members able to give spiritual leadership.

Many of the people in the church had had strong connections with the Presbytery and Synod. It was felt that the Network was not serving them as the Eyre Peninsula Presbytery had done. The ideal for most people was having one minister who also lived in the town. However, it was recognised that that was not likely to occur. While some felt they did not see much of the minister, they appreciated that he was around, active in the wider community and available when needed.



## *Case Study 4:* **Millicent Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Millicent is 400 kilometres south-east of Adelaide on the Princes Highway, and 50 kilometres north-west of Mt Gambier. Nearby Beachport, which also has a Uniting Church, has only 500 people residents and is largely a retirement centre and holiday destination. In 2006, there were 5,551 people living in the Millicent / Beachport area, and the median age was the same as for South Australia. While many are employed in farming, Kimberly-Clark provides other employment opportunities in its large paper mill just outside Millicent, supplied with timber from extensive pine plantations in the area. Some major wind farms have been constructed on the nearby coast, but these have had a limited effect on the local economy. The Housing Trust has built some homes in the area. Among the people living in them are some with significant problems in mental health, substance abuse, poverty, and unemployment.

In terms of religious identification, the largest groups were 'no religion' and Catholic, followed by Anglican, Uniting Church, with significantly smaller numbers for Presbyterian & Reformed, 'other denominations/Christian' and Lutheran. In the Local Government Area, between 1996 and 2006, there was a decline of almost 25 per cent in those identifying with the Uniting Church.

There were about ten churches in Millicent including Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist, and Uniting. Most of the churches were small and struggling, and, to varying extents, dependent on lay leadership. However, the churches worked quite closely together supporting a chaplain at the high school and conducting combined worship on the fifth Sunday of the month.

### *Millicent Uniting Church Congregation*

Typically, around 40 people attended the Millicent Uniting church on Sundays and six attended the church at Beachport. The majority in both congregations were aged over 60 although there were a few younger people associated with the churches. Most of the congregation are willing to try new things and agreed that their leaders encouraged innovation.

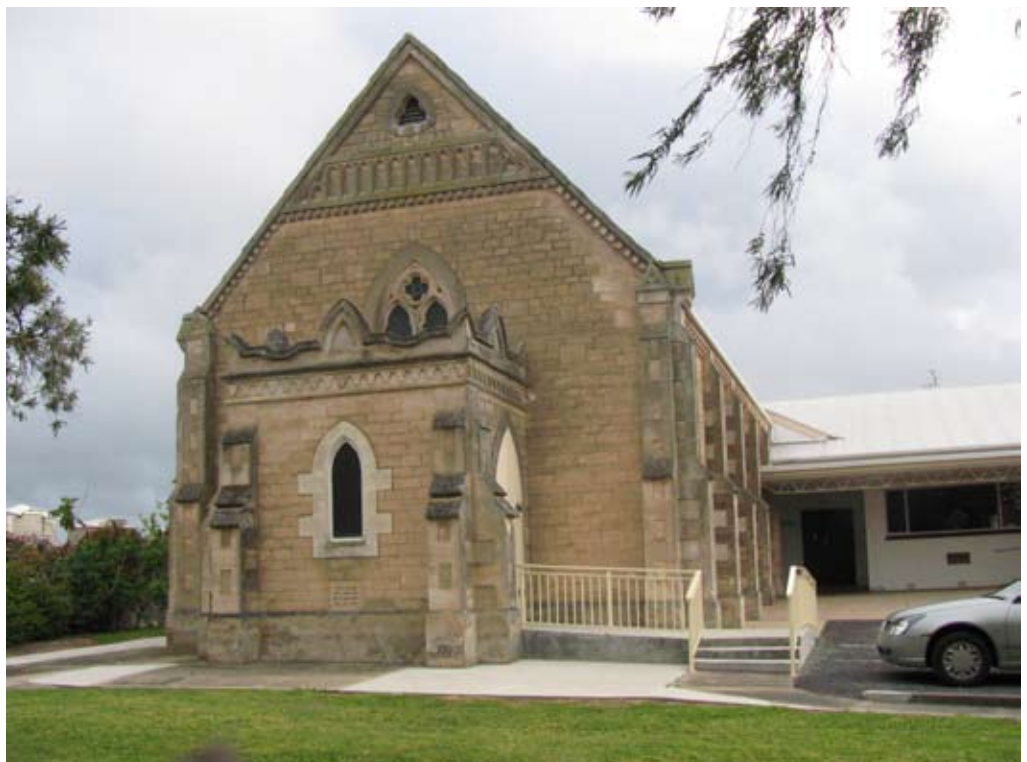
Millicent Uniting Church has quite a large suite of buildings, which is frequently used by various groups in the community and for church outreach and social activities.

A church secretary, paid for a few hours of work a week, provided an important contact point for the church and ensured that the church activities run smoothly. Rosters were drawn up for people to preach, lead worship and to participate in other ways. Some members of the team had undertaken studies to help them in their leadership role. Previous ministers had mentored people in the congregation assisting them to prepare for the ministry they were undertaking.

Many felt there had been real gains in developing lay team ministry. Team members had grown as they had discovered, sometimes reluctantly, new gifts and abilities. Among some of the people, the sense of fellowship and inter-dependence had deepened. However, some others felt that an ordained minister would bring greater theological and spiritual depth to the life of the congregation.

In various ways, the church was reaching to the community. Members took services in the hospital and nursing home. They supported a chaplain in the local school. They ministered to the community through a drop-in centre, film afternoons, card-making ministries and social activities.

The support of the Presbytery, particularly through the mission planner, was appreciated. While active in a Network, it was generally felt that it had not been very effective, being highly dependent on volunteers with multiple and diverse commitments.



## *Case Study 5:* **Padthaway Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Situated on the Riddoch Highway, Padthaway is in the heart of the Limestone Coast wine region, and about two and a half hours drive from Adelaide. The population of the town was around 300 people. In 2006, the median age was a little lower than the South Australian average. The town's growth was at a plateau; little land was available for housing and services were too few to attract newcomers. The community thought it was 'drought proof', but in 2005 and 2006, it was affected by drought, as well as severe frosts in 2006. Farming families have always been important in this area, but, with farm size increasing, there are now fewer people on the land. There was some confidence that the local wineries would help to keep the town going economically.

In terms of religious identification, 'no religion' was by far the biggest group and rising, followed by Uniting Church and, further down, Anglican, Catholic and Lutheran. The 'Family Vineyard' Church was formed twelve years ago largely as a breakaway group from the Uniting congregation on the issue of homosexual ministry. There is inter-church good will but, because of theological differences, the churches rarely worshipped together apart from Christmas Eve. Nevertheless, several people felt the future in Padthaway would be a united 'Community Church'.

### *The Padthaway Uniting Church Community*

The Uniting Church is the largest of the churches in Padthaway. For the size of the congregation, the Uniting Church makes a very large contribution to the town through activities, special events, and counselling services. A member of the congregation is a highly regarded primary school chaplain and trained counsellor. Various non-church groups use the church hall for their activities.

No older youth or young adults attended church at the time of case-study. Also largely missing was the 25 to 40 age group. There were several members over 80 years of age who were still involved in church activities.

The ministry team appears to be very dynamic, gets on very well together and shares a good range of skills and experience. The administrator and the council chair, together with a part-time secretary (eight hours per week), take care of the general paperwork; a good strategy to allow the rest of the lay team to focus on pastoral matters. The busyness of life precludes regular meetings so that informal networking is important. Lay leadership is flexible with an emphasis on shared responsibilities. Without an ordained minister on hand, there is still concern about what exactly are their roles and about 'burn-out'.

One leader mentioned that he would love to see more activity together with another Network and noted the good range of preachers in that area. Seminars in Adelaide were sometimes attended by people from the congregation.

The congregation 'copes pretty well' without an ordained minister, but felt it was important to have an area resource minister, especially one who could provide a detached perspective on issues, give experienced advice, and one with theological depth for faith development. The resource minister's role was seen as more important pastorally than as a preaching role: encouraging, but not taking over as leader.



## *Case Study 6:* **Pinnaroo Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Located in the Mallee, Pinnaroo is primarily a farming community. It is close to the border between South Australia and Victoria and is on the main road between Adelaide and Sydney. In the late 1990s, the population and economy stabilised as farm product prices improved. Underground water reserves began to be used for new crops such as potatoes, but drought has been a major problem, particularly for wheat farmers.

In 2006, 586 people lived in Pinnaroo, and a high proportion were aged 55 and over. Nevertheless, there are quite a few young children. Some people had come to the area because of cheap housing. A small group of people, mostly retired, ran most of the local organisations. Over recent years, services have declined. Some suggested it was difficult maintaining morale in the town.

In terms of religious affiliation, over one quarter identified with the Uniting Church, less with 'no religion', followed by the Catholic Church, Lutherans and Anglicans. Between 1996 and 2006, numbers identifying with the Uniting and Lutheran churches declined. The major churches in the town were the Uniting, Lutheran and Catholic. Most of these churches had been formed early in the history of Pinnaroo, and were around 100 years old. There was also an Anglican church and a small Jehovah's Witnesses group. There were no resident clergy in any of the churches. There is an active Interchurch Council which organises joint evening services once a quarter and other occasional joint activities.

### *Pinnaroo Uniting Church Congregation*

At the time of case study, more than half the Pinnaroo congregation were in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, although some younger families were involved. Most attenders were long-term residents of Pinnaroo. The average attendance at services was about 35 people.

The last minister who lived in Pinnaroo left in 1998. The church was then served by a minister who was based at Lameroo and also ministered at Murrayville. Since 2003, the church has been served by a lay ministry team. While the rostered service leader and preacher meet to prepare the

service and coordinate with the musician, the worship team meets only occasionally. Other organisations in the church, such as the Ladies' Auxiliary and the Kids' Club, have their own structures. Many members were involved in pastoral care, either officially or unofficially. Services were regularly conducted at the hospital. Most of the leaders in the church are also leaders of the wider community and active in many community activities such as the local radio station and the Heritage Centre.

The Presbytery mission planner was well-known by the church and his practical input and country life experience were appreciated. However, some felt the need for more support and guidance from someone who was trained, who could assist in resolving conflicts and who could offer counselling in times of crisis. There was little confidence in developing youth work without some external input. Training opportunities in Adelaide were impractical. While visits by the people associated with the Network had been helpful, some members were dubious about the overall value of the Network as there was limited mutual support among the member churches. Pinnaroo Uniting Church did experience support from a couple of other churches not part of the Network.

In some ways, leadership of the church had evolved in a de facto manner. A few key people had taken leadership and were ensuring that the church continued to operate smoothly. The work of the ministry team was much appreciated, but there were some concerns about who would take on leadership if some of the current leaders were unable to maintain their ministry.





## *Case Study 7:* **Port Vincent Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Port Vincent is a town on the Yorke Peninsula about 220 kms from Adelaide. It is a retirement centre and a holiday destination. Off-season it has a population of less than 500 people. Most people work in retail in the few shops in the town, or in tourism, running holiday accommodation. There are few other employment opportunities, particularly for younger people. People have purchased holiday homes in the area and many homes in the town are empty during the week. Some of those who purchase homes, then retire to Port Vincent. However, there is limited land available for large scale developments unless some re-zoning of farming land around the town occurs.

In terms of religious identification, less than a third described themselves as being Uniting Church, one fifth as Anglican, with much smaller proportions describing themselves as 'no religion', Catholic and Lutheran. There are two churches in the town: Anglican and Uniting. The Anglican Church holds services every second week. Some people in the town go to nearby Stansbury where there is a Community Church with activities for young people. Catholics drive 25 kilometres to Minlaton.

### *Port Vincent Uniting Church Congregation*

The Uniting Church holds services every week with an average attendance of around 30 people. Members of the congregation came from a range of denominational backgrounds: Churches of Christ, Lutheran as well as Uniting. Nearly 70 per cent of the congregation were female, most were over 60 years and 94 per cent were retired. Just two members were employed. More than 30 per cent of the present congregation joined within the last 5 years, but there has been a small decline in average attendance.

The administration of the church was primarily in the hands of three elders working with another two or three people who, together, constituted the Ministry Team. Occasional meetings of the church council were held. However, the church preferred to make decisions inclusively after the morning service. The Ministry Team's primary activity was the organisation of services and it met

every three months for that purpose. Members of the team took one service a month, while on other Sundays the church was served by a range of lay preachers mostly from one or other of the ten Uniting churches on the Yorke Peninsula. Two representatives of the Port Vincent Ministry Team met with the 'Ministry Task Group' which co-ordinated the activities of the ten churches.

There was also some involvement in the HOPE network and appreciation for some of the events it organised. Most of the leaders said they could not easily get to Adelaide for things and often felt they were not relevant.

Generally, members of the congregation were happy to be involved in the various church rosters, but few were willing to take on co-ordinating roles. They were looking forward to the appointment of a minister for the churches on the Yorke Peninsula. On the other hand, most felt that having lay people as preachers was working quite well and it was recognised that if there was one minister serving ten churches, involvement in Port Vincent would be limited. Those involved in leadership indicated they found their ministry fulfilling, although there were concerns about health, and what would happen if they were unable to continue.

The Ministry Team ensured that the life of the church was maintained in a healthy way. It was well organised and its worship was meaningful to those who attended. It had fellowship activities and a Bible study group. It was serving the wider community through its Kids' Club and the Drop-In Centre as well as through its services. The members were active in the community and the whole community supported each other. Every newcomer to the community was visited and invited to the church.



## *Case Study 8:* **Renmark Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Renmark is the largest town in South Australia's Riverland area. It is 250 kms northeast of Adelaide and 135 kms west of Mildura. It is situated on the Murray River and is the oldest settlement on the river. In 2006, there were 4,340 people living in Renmark and a similar number in the farms around it. The town is much more multicultural than most South Australian rural towns. Beyond the irrigation area, wheat and sheep are farmed. There has been an increase in large agri-businesses and there was some talk about the possibility of Renmark becoming a centre for people working in mining centres.



The town has seen some difficult times, but its people have been described as 'survivors'. At the time of the case-study in 2007, the Murray River had virtually ceased to flow. This was having an impact on crops. Many businesses were suffering and stress and depression were common.

In terms of religious identification, the biggest group was 'no religion', with Uniting Church, Anglican, Catholic and Lutheran ranging between 12 and 14 per cent, and 5 per cent Eastern Orthodox. The 2006 Census also recorded that there were some Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs living in the area. The largest and most vibrant church in the area was Lutheran. Many of the churches were small and struggling. Some Renmark residents were travelling to nearby towns to strong family-oriented churches.

### **Renmark Uniting Church Congregation**

The Renmark Uniting Church consisted of two congregations: West Renmark and the central Renmark church. About 10 to 12 people regularly attended the West Renmark church, and around 30 people attended the central

Renmark Church on a typical Sunday. Usually, the same person took services at both churches.

There were eight people from the central congregation on the Council and three from Renmark West. There were separate groups for organising worship, pastoral care and property. A group of four people, the secretary, the chair of Council, the deputy chair, and the head of pastoral care, acted as an informal executive. The Renmark churches had shared a minister with the Loxton Uniting Church. However, at the time of the case-study, Loxton and Renmark were looking for another minister. In the interim, lay preachers took services with some being taken by a team of Renmark members.

While the leaders reported that they had developed new skills undertaking leadership in worship, they were keen to find another minister who could assist them. Several of them had other work and family commitments and had little free time. Some were open to ecumenical partnerships, although there were no clear possibilities. A chaplain of schools in Renmark took services at the Uniting Church once a month and ran a Kids' Club with the assistance of members of the congregation.

Among other activities was a 'Helping Hands' craft group and monthly lunches after Sunday services. Members were also involved in a wide range of groups in the community. The church supported chaplaincy in the schools. The church was concerned about the crisis brought about by the drought, but had limited resources to help.

The support of the Mission Planner was appreciated. The Network had also offered some assistance, although there was little clarity about what the Network could achieve.



## *Case Study 9:* **Spalding Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Spalding is a small, rural town in the mid-north of South Australia, 180 kilometres north of Adelaide. It has around 300 people and services a district population of up to 500 people. Spalding sits at the centre of a network of creeks and rivers, which meet to form the Broughton River. The Morgan Whyalla Pipeline runs across the Spalding countryside. The district is renowned for cropping, sheep and cattle production in fertile valleys. Farming is becoming more intensive. Hay is produced for local and export markets. Apiarists continue to farm honey in the district. The town has a proud history of volunteering, a reflection of the 'DIY' attitude many rural people have. A few families have moved to Spalding to take advantage of lower-cost housing.

In terms of religious identification, a quarter described themselves as Catholic and another quarter as 'no religion'. One fifth described themselves as Uniting Church and small proportions as Anglican or 'other denominations/just Christian'. Lutheran identification was very small. The churches in Spalding are Catholic, Anglican and Uniting. Ecumenical cooperation is very healthy and, when possible, combined events are held out in the community rather than in a church. All of the main denominations are losing people, but there is still much pride in identifying with the church.

### *Spalding Uniting Church Congregation*

Uniting Church worship is held weekly with an average congregation of about 12 people. While small in numbers, Spalding's age profile was younger than other rural Uniting congregations visited. Spalding has one of the earliest Uniting lay ministry teams in rural South Australia. Lay leadership looks after administration and any issues which might arise. People are often not prepared to commit to weekly attendance which makes it difficult to make up rosters for weekly service. There is no longer a Kids' Club as the congregation ran out of people and energy.

The Spalding congregation generally felt that it was appropriate to focus on working with the other denominations in the local community rather than on working with other Uniting Churches. If the church was to survive here, there was a strong feeling that Spalding's churches would need to form one worshipping community. There were two ordained ministers available to Spalding's Christian community, from the local Catholic and Anglican churches. It was felt that the addition of an ordained Uniting minister could make concelebration possible. The Uniting/Anglican theological boundaries were described as 'blurring' and there was enthusiasm for the possibility of amalgamation. The other model suggested was the 'house church'.

There would need to be time to allow for transition to new ways of being church, of creating worshipping communities that work. The comment was made that "change is not fatal".

## *Case Study 10:* **Wilmington Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Wilmington is a town in the southern Flinders Ranges region 290km north of Adelaide and 40 kilometres south-east of Port Augusta. The area has a farming community which produces wheat and wool. Sheep, cattle, pigs and lucerne are also farmed. Many of the original fifty farms in the area are now consolidated. In recent years, the area has diversified into wine grapes, olives and tourism. Because of the drought, some farmers have sought work off-farm to support their families. A number have mining jobs, although living away from home for weeks at a time is disruptive of family life. There are plans for a new residential development to help accommodate mining employees from Roxby Downs. Only basic services are available in Wilmington.

At the 2006 census, Wilmington had a population of 220 people and the median age was about ten years older than the South Australian and national averages. There were no people in the 20-24 year old age group. There is great difficulty in persuading people to take leadership in the local community. Many of the main stalwarts have died, left the district or 'burnt out'. Many newcomers work and socialise in Port Augusta.

In terms of religious identification, a quarter described themselves as being Uniting Church, less than 15 per cent described themselves as Anglican, ten per cent as Catholic, and less than ten per cent for both Lutheran and other denominations. Less than one fifth identified with 'no religion'. Churches in town are Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and a Cooneyite Community. Apart from the Cooneyites, the churches enjoy strong ecumenical relations. A combined service is held once a month at each of the Uniting, Anglican and Lutheran churches in turn. All four main denominations are involved in the community together.

### *Wilmington Uniting Church Congregation*

The Wilmington congregation is made up of 70 per cent women, reflecting its aging profile. In 2006, 20 per cent of the attenders were employed. Attendance has fallen 26 per cent over the last five years.

This is a small congregation with few resources and a dedicated lay leadership team, working very hard to survive. Leadership has developed largely by default. The leadership team support each other and the leadership offered is appreciated by the congregation. The ministry team almost never meets as a group because of time constraints, but individuals were in regular contact with each other.

An ordained minister, based in Boolaroo Centre,

has oversight of six congregations in the district. The Wilmington congregation felt supported by the minister although it recognised that he had many other commitments. The Parish had around nine preachers, ordained and lay, who were rostered to visit the various churches. Some Sunday sermons were rostered to be taken by lay members of the local congregation. Two people in the Wilmington ministry team were confident leading services. Lay ministry was seen positively by most members of the congregation. However, without some support from a suitably trained person, maintaining ministry at Wilmington would be difficult.



## *Case Study 11:* **Wudinna & Districts Uniting Church**

### *The Community*

Wudinna is a larger-than-average Eyre Peninsula wheatbelt town located about 570 kms from Adelaide on the Eyre Highway. It is on the edge of the Gawler Ranges and services a population of around 1,500 people in the surrounding district. While agriculture (cereal cropping plus some sheep and cattle) is the main industry, tourism and mining have begun to develop. Some people are retiring to Wudinna, including farmers from the surrounding district. Nevertheless, a general decrease in population together with sustained drought and other changes is testing the community's resilience.

In 2006, there were 513 people usually resident in the town and the median age was higher than the South Australian and national averages. Cheaper housing is thought to have contributed to Wudinna becoming a more low-income area often of people with few family support networks.

In terms of religious identification, a quarter described themselves as being Uniting Church, with smaller proportions of Catholics, 'no religion', Lutherans and Anglican, in that order. The various denominations in town have worked together and supported each other for some time. The Wudinna Ecumenical Council (WEC) is very community-minded and works with the local hospital, aged care facility, school and the local council.

### *Wudinna and Districts Uniting Congregation*

Wudinna used to be the centre of a cluster of churches, most of which have been closed. At the time of the case study, services were held in Wudinna itself and at Minnipa, 37 kilometres further west along the Eyre Highway. There was a deep sense of passion in the congregation both for their faith and the well-being of their church and the wider community. However, the vagaries of drought and socio-economic issues were adding substantially to the stress in their lives. The challenges for this ageing congregation included the workload of lay ministers and the reticence of many members to taking on church leadership roles.

Although a number of those interviewed felt that the leadership team had a good range of skills they also expressed a need for lay people to have more training. Despite the acceptance of lay leadership as a viable model of ministry, the ideal was seen as an ordained minister who could provide guidance and support.

New hope had been raised through church amalgamation. A Covenant between the Uniting and Lutheran congregations had been adopted. The two churches had one minister (currently Lutheran) and held services as a single congregation alternately in the Uniting and Lutheran congregations.

Amongst all the denominations, the Uniting Church was seen as being particularly active in the town. A Kids Klub, morning tea for school staff first day of each term, Emmaus calendars for outreach, National Day of Thanksgiving and a number of other activities were run under the WEC banner.

The Wudinna congregation's Executive Committee was made up of a Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary plus one other person. There were four Servant Leaders and a contact person for Minnipa services. The Minnipa Congregational Chairman liaised closely with and was also part of the Wudinna Executive.

The Network in which Wudinna participated was not seen as working as well as the Eyre Peninsula Presbytery had, largely because of problems of distance and time. But those in leadership acknowledged that it was up to them to do more to help make it work.





## Rural Church Life

Throughout rural South Australia, in 150 or more small Uniting Churches, faithful leaders ensure that worship occurs weekly and the sick are visited. These churches provide a moral basis for their communities and encourage their members to be involved in community life. Week by week, they encourage love for God and love for neighbour. Most local leadership was given by lay people. In some places, there was an ordained minister with responsibility for a larger cluster of congregations in the area.

Where they case studies were held, the numbers worshipping on Sunday morning ranged from 10 to 40 people. The typical congregation consisted of around 30 people. In most places, attendances had decreased during the five years between 2001 and 2006. Newcomers within the last five years, including those from other denominations, were few and were more than offset by people who had died, or who had left the congregations mostly because of the lack of a Uniting Church Assembly decision about leadership by practising homosexuals.

While serving the older people of the rural communities well, few of the churches were having much impact on people under the age of 55 in their communities, including young people and young families, although many have a Kids' Club. As has been argued elsewhere, the ways that younger people regard religious faith and spirituality has changed from being the 'framework of life' and the 'foundation of the moral rules for family and community', and has become a lifestyle choice. Few younger people are attracted to the traditional forms of church life (Hughes 2007). Rather than be involved weekly in a congregation, they are more likely to attend special one-off activities such as discussion forums, music festivals, workshops and seminars, retreats and pilgrimages, or breakfasts with an inspirational speaker. Few churches have the capacity to take new initiatives in these ways.

In the typical rural church, four lay people were taking leadership with the assistance of their spouses. Most of these leaders were in their 60s and 70s. While there were a few younger people associated with most of the congregations, few were sufficiently committed or had the ability to take on leadership in the future. Thus, in most of the churches there was some anxiety about the long-term future of the leadership team.

Theologically, most congregations were Evangelical, many aligning themselves with the Association of Confessing Churches. Most members interviewed reported that worship in their church was generally good and the sermons were appreciated. Lay preachers related well to the people's experience of daily life. However, some of those interviewed noted that lay preaching sometimes lacked theological or spiritual depth

and challenge for the congregation. The lack of continuity in having different lay preachers each week was also noted.

Most worship teams met infrequently due to time pressures. Most communicated informally. In many places, more and more is expected of fewer and fewer people who often talked about the 'burden' of ongoing church tasks, not just in terms of hours but also skills and experience.

There was a strong sense of community in all the congregations. Most attenders had been part of the church community for a long time. Indeed, the sense of belonging to the local Uniting Church was much greater than a sense of belonging to the Uniting Church as a whole. However, some people said that, while the social life of the church was strong, devotional life had weakened. In some places, people were more involved in church-based social groups than in prayer and Bible study groups.

Few people involved in leadership had formal theological or pastoral education, apart from lay preaching certificates. A couple of people were currently doing courses with a theological college. Others said they would like to do some formal study of this kind, but the costs of time and money were too great, or competing pressures made it inconvenient. For many, it is impractical to attend regular activities in Adelaide. Seminars and workshops organised by the Rural Mission Planners, or more occasionally by Networks, were appreciated, offering practical advice for ministry.

Several congregations had small, but nonetheless vibrant, Sunday Schools which, in some cases, attracted some children from non-church families. However, if the congregation lost its one or two members who were enthusiastic Sunday School leaders, the school's closure was a foregone conclusion. Many congregations, mainly through ecumenical groups, were involved in religious education in local public schools, or more frequently through the support of a chaplain.

### Reflection on Faith

It was noted in the case studies that most rural churches have a 'conservative theology'. What is important in rural theology is not maintaining traditions as such, but the preservation of what are seen as the building blocks of rural society – family and community loyalty. Most rural communities believe that these building blocks must be preserved in forms with which they are familiar. Church leadership by homosexuals is seen by many rural church attenders as anathema on Biblical grounds, but it is also seen as a threat to the nature of the major social institutions around which their lives revolve – family and community.

The maintenance of the structures of community and family is essential for community life. While rural people are highly resilient, they are also highly dependent on each other at family and community levels. Hence, they are deeply committed to preserving these structures. This leads to some frustration to people who enter the community but do not contribute to community life. It also means that most rural people are reluctant to 'stick their heads' above others, accepting leadership reluctantly.

A secondly part of much 'rural theology' is the belief in a God who intervenes in the affairs of daily life, such as the weather. This belief may, in fact, be strengthened by the sense of dependence on the weather. It may also contribute to the sense that the weather varies according to God's will, rather than there being global changes such as those envisaged in the theories of climate change. Hence, the basic pillars of 'rural theology' are trust in God and love for one another expressed in these ways.

Rural thinking about faith is usually expressed in oral rather than written forms and is practical in nature. It is seen in pre-eminently practical terms rather than in terms of theoretical concepts. For example, rural expression of faith do not focus on ideas about God, but on trust in a living God who actively intervenes in people's lives.

## Pastoral care and Outreach

Informal pastoral care, such as hospital visiting or helping a person or family through a crisis, was strong. Some churches organised services nursing homes and hospitals. Pastoral care often crossed denominational boundaries. Several churches saw one of their major forms of outreach as catering for funerals.

While there was usually some form of pastoral care going on as part of a congregation's mission, often those interviewed lamented the lack of people and other resources to undertake more of this work in the community. Also, members of congregations often felt they lacked the training and skills which an ordained minister would have to successfully carry out pastoral care, particularly in times of grief or major crisis.

Craft and drop-in groups, men's groups, Kid's clubs, periodic lunches or dinners also attracted those from the wider community. In these sort of activities, there was often a blurring of the boundaries between fellowship and outreach.

The outreach activities of each church varied. For example,, one church provided every person moving into the town with a 'welcome basket' and an invitation to the church. Another held monthly Sunday dinners and many conducted regular craft groups. In most places, people attended these activities who did not come to worship but found a sense of community and acceptance in these groups.

Several churches ran op-shops, a couple of them had a drop-in centre, and some ran film nights or film afternoons. It was noted in a number of places that the church always had a stall in the local agricultural show.

Apart from the significant involvement of congregations in outreach through church-based service groups, a very high proportion of the attenders in the various congregations were involved as individuals in community-based service or welfare groups such as Apex, local 'progress' groups, hospital auxiliaries, and 'Meals on Wheels'. Members were also very involved in other community organisations such as local schools, sporting groups, and major town events. In all the rural churches, there was strong evidence of civic mindedness and high levels of voluntary involvement in the wider community.

While there were many good things happening, few congregations had a clear vision for the future. The immediate goal in most places was to keep the doors of their church open, to provide services of worship, and keep as many of the various programs going as possible.

## Leadership

In every place we visited, there was a ministry team of lay people. In several places these teams were supported by a minister with responsibility for several congregations. In one place, the team was working with a lay pastor. In other places the teams were operating independently, mostly within a single church, but occasionally with responsibility for a second church.

In many of the churches, a small group of lay people gave strong and sustained leadership. The actual assigned positions might vary, but these *de facto* leaders continued to guide their churches. This accords with the nature of leadership in rural areas. On the surface, such leadership is offered hesitantly. Unofficially these people make sure things happen. These people were wise, good leaders, working hard to maintain the lives of their churches.

A couple of churches had a paid part-time administrator. These administrators ensured everything at the church ran smoothly. While these people did not necessarily run the services themselves or do pastoral work, they performed very valuable roles as contact and anchor people, even if paid for just a few hours a week.

Some members of these lay teams found the ministry fulfilling and felt that they were growing in faith themselves through their involvement. A few found the ministry burdensome and were only doing it because there was no one else who could do it.

There were several factors which contributed to the positive way in which involvement in the team

was regarded. Among them were people's confidence in contributing and their time and capacity to contribute. While this largely depended on individual circumstances, personal characteristics and levels of education, to some extent it depended on the mentoring that team members had received from ministers, as they were introduced to the functions of ministry.

While it was not often explicitly discussed, it was often hinted that leadership within one's own community had certain limitations. People spoke of the need for a leader or counsellor to come from outside the community for reasons of confidentiality, real or perceived. It is difficult when one is entwined in a range of kinship and other social relations to challenge the members of one's community to step outside their 'comfort zones', or, sometimes, to offer pastoral care.

Some members of the congregations said how they longed for the involvement of an ordained minister, if just occasionally. They felt that ordained ministers generally offered greater depth in their preaching and were more effective in challenging the congregations.

Within the ministry teams, there was often some division of responsibilities. Some were confident about preaching, others happy just to lead services. Some focussed on pastoral care or taking services in aged care homes. For most of them, the focus was on keeping the church going.

One comment made from time to time was that, when the ordained minister left, it was not easy to know what they should be doing. What had to be maintained? What could be given up? Most teams sought largely to replicate the ministry they had seen exercised by ordained ministers.

The issue of age was one of the greatest long-term concerns in relation to team ministries. While there are currently people who can contribute to team ministry, and it is likely that, in many churches there will be people able to do so for the next five to ten years, it is not clear what will happen after that. Hence, lay team ministry may be a passing phenomenon in most areas.

The second major issue is innovation. While lay ministry teams have kept the churches alive in many places, they have kept the current patterns going for those already in the church. Few congregations had been able to engage younger people in worship or in other aspects of the life of the church. Consequently, few if any of the congregations were confident of a long-term future.

Nor, in most cases, have the congregations been able to respond effectively to community issues of drought, of declining communities both in terms of population, services and activities. In every centre visited but one, farming was a major part of the economy of the

region. In most communities there was anxiety about drought and concerns about failing rural economies. In many places, there was a real concern about the mental health of people in the area. Some spoke of widespread depression. In several of these places, people spoke of watching out for signs among their neighbours that might indicate that people were suicidal.

In several communities, there were small pockets of people who had come to the area because the housing was cheap or because it was provided by the South Australian government's Housing Trust. They included single parents and people on permanent disability pensions. Particularly in the larger groupings of these people, there were significant problems of substance abuse and mental health. In general, these people did not integrate well with other sectors of the community. While some churches sought to teach out to these people, ministry among them was difficult.

While the church might be seen as foundational to the community spirit, it was certainly not the only expression, or even the major expression, of the community. Indeed, in most rural communities, the major expression of community life occurred at the sports ground on Saturday afternoon, in the pub, or in the occasional community festivals.

Rural churches have, in the past, attracted people because they provided the moral ground and centre for community life. However, such roles are no longer attracting people. Most members of the rural churches were deeply dedicated to their church and their faith. But with few resources in terms of people with time and experience, with few paid leaders who can put effort into experimentation, there is little capacity for innovative ministry to their communities. As a whole church, there is a need to look at whether there are other possibilities for effective mission in rural areas.

## **Supporting and Resourcing Ministry**

Most leaders indicated that they found considerable support within their families, among their friends, in the congregations and through the wider community. Especially within the smaller rural communities, people noted that if their church did something, they could be confident of support from the rest of the community. 'We all help each other out' was the common sentiment.

Most of the churches in the rural areas cooperated well with the churches of other denominations. In most rural centres, there was an active inter-church council which organised services in the local aged care facilities, and often organised combined services for the town on a regular basis.

Many rural people saw the future of the church in their community as occurring through ecumenical partnerships. Many people said that they saw no point in each denomination having its own services and activities:

there should be one church for the community. The path to attaining this vision was not an easy one, however. For many churches, it was the last resort rather than the ideal. If they could keep going independently, they would.

Feelings about the various Uniting Church structures for support of the churches were somewhat mixed. When speaking of the Presbytery / Synod as a decision-making body located in Adelaide, the feelings were often quite negative. Its decisions were not always appreciated and its written communications contributed to people feeling it was remote from them. While some appreciated the courses of the Theological College, others felt it was too difficult to take courses in Adelaide.

However, when speaking about the activities and assistance of the Mission Planners, the feelings were generally very positive. Their practical help had been appreciated. However, it was noted that their contributions were spread very thin over many congregations.

In most churches, the recently established Networks of congregations were not a major factor in the provision of support or fellowship. With many Networks spread over large geographical areas, joint activities were infrequent. Many Networks were limited by the assistance that a few lay volunteers could offer. Several congregations felt that the Networks had not replaced the prior presbyteries in which they had had greater involvement. However, the Hope Network had not only provided a forum in relation to the homosexuality issue that concerned many rural churches but had provided considerable support to its member churches.

Most rural churches visited had good physical resources although there were some problems with ageing buildings. Most had access to an overhead projector and several churches had data projectors. In preparing for sermons or services, some rural people turned to the Internet. The extent to which this occurred depended on whether high-speed Internet connections were available (and in some rural communities they were not), and whether leaders felt comfortable in the use of computers. Some people indicated that they were not sure where to find materials on the Internet.

DVDs are available to churches as a means of providing services and sermons. One or two churches had used them. Some others were interested, but others felt that such services would not be well received. Most preferred the personal interaction of a local lay preacher who knew the people and their context. Some rural churches used recorded music for singing, but only as a last resort.

In several churches, the existence of on-going sister relationships with other churches was mentioned, especially as providing support through fellowship. Groups of people would visit the rural church

from time to time and visits would be reciprocated. Unlike the fellowship activities of the Network, these activities involved everyone in the church and could be particularly important for young people.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

To provide support for rural congregations the dwindling supply of ordained leaders needs to be addressed. There are some real advantages in having one person who is paid, whether full-time or part-time, to take leadership in a church. One possibility is to actively seek rural people who understand the rural context and who have shown leadership in their churches. With some training, they can be very effective as lay pastors. Even if an ordained or lay minister is not available, a paid part-time administrator can do much to maintain the activities of the congregation.

In many places, the lay teams are working effectively, particularly where they have been mentored and where they have the support of a paid administrative assistant. However, the teams need continued mentoring and support to increase their skills in ministry and to prevent burn-out. 'Resource Ministers' could effectively provide oversight of lay leaders in clusters of 10 to 15 congregations. Rather than seek to serve the congregations themselves, they should focus on working with lay teams, lay pastors and lay preachers across the congregations in terms of ensuring that training, back-up crisis counselling, organisational advice, and programs for the spiritual formation of the lay team members are provided.

However, it would be expected that the Resource Ministers would get to know all the congregations in the area and preach at those congregations from time to time. It may be that, as Internet links are built, Resource Ministers or other regional leaders could preach simultaneously through video Internet links to several congregations. Resource Ministers might run courses themselves, extending the activities the Rural Mission Planners have been doing. As with all new forms of ministry, it would be important to review how 'Resource Ministry' is developing in five years or so.

It is important that congregations provide support for each other. However, the Networks that have recently been developed in South Australia are not working very effectively. The Networks need to be re-formed, based on local clusters of 10 or 15 congregations, ideally the same group as is served by a Resource Minister. A paid administrative assistant could assist in organising activities for the Network or cluster.

Different patterns of organisation are possible according to the nature and size of the community and congregations need to feel free to develop what is appropriate for their situation. Ecumenical ventures can sometimes be effective and the development of 'community churches' should be encouraged. In small, isolated communities, it may be appropriate to move to 'house church' models. Congregations with lay leadership should not feel they need to maintain the relatively formal patterns of church-life they experienced

when they had an ordained minister of their own.

It is unlikely that many of the present lay ministry teams will be able to maintain ministry past 2020 given the age profile not only of the present leadership teams but also of the congregations. For many, the crisis point will arrive much sooner. For the long-term future and to enable the Uniting Church to reach out beyond those currently involved in the churches, some new initiatives are needed. Effective ministry among young people and young families may involve quite different patterns of ministry to those currently used, probably involving a variety of short-term programs and projects.

There are dire needs in most rural communities due to the pressures of drought and declining rural economies, resulting in depressed communities. It is likely that climate changes will exacerbate these problems in some areas in the future. Most rural churches are not currently equipped to deal with such challenges.

One way of seeking to address the issue of long-term ministry and innovation in response to the needs of the community would be the establishing of 'Rural Missions' in which new congregational ministries were combined with welfare programs. Such Missions should be focussed on providing both care and spiritual nurture for people throughout the region. They should be established on a regional basis, serving the surrounding communities through teams of people who visit communities through the region. Some of the funding for these Rural Missions should be sought through welfare agencies, as well as through local government and the churches themselves. While their focus should be the development of new forms of ministry to the wider community rather than the support of existing churches, they should seek to work cooperatively with existing churches.

New initiatives need new forms of training. It is important for the Theological College to continue to develop appropriate programs that assist in preparing lay pastors, lay teams, Resource Ministers and those involved in Rural Missions for their respective ministries. Effective ministry will involve the effective engagement of rural ways of thinking about faith. It must take seriously its assumptions and understand its deep roots in rural community and family life. Ministry which seeks to introduce different assumptions and is theoretical in nature is likely to be ineffective.

This has major implications for training for ministry. Training for rural ministry must involve training in listening and understanding rural expressions of faith. It must seek ways in which that faith may be enhanced and developed, rather than focussing on the minister's own understanding of Scripture and theology.



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