

Rural Ministry Committee

<i>Convenor</i>	Ms Yuko Tonai-Moore
<i>Deputy General Secretary</i>	Rev Dr Ian Tozer
<i>Coordinator-Staff</i>	Rev Ruth Vertigan
<i>Rural Ministry Associate</i>	Rev Alistair Melville
<i>Member</i>	Ms Anne Barnes
<i>Member</i>	Dr Robert French
<i>Member</i>	Ms Jill Clements
<i>Administration support</i>	Ms Alice Boomer

Since the November Presbytery meeting, we have had two phone meetings and one face-to-face meeting to look into the Rules for the Committee, made changes to reflect what we do as the Committee and discussed the future direction. We are fortunate to have a team committed to making a difference in rural congregations' wellbeing.

Developing a culture of open communication

We have identified the complexity and the fluidness of rural congregations and having good open communication is a vital tool to give appropriate advice and support that congregations require in times of need.

Rev Ruth Vertigan has continued visiting many congregations across the rural areas. She has also attended regional gatherings and cluster meetings as often as possible, bringing a listening ear and a symbol of connection with the wider church. Her visitations and physical presence at gatherings and meetings is an essential component of fostering open

communication between congregations and the wider church.

Many congregations, regardless of minister placement, receive monthly resources, either online or in hard copy, to assist in service preparation. They are now recognised as valuable resources by the wider church and demand for them is increasing.

Increasing the Church's capacity for community engagement

Graduation ceremonies for graduates who completed the Certificate IV course with Australian College of Ministries (ACOM) with Rev Alistair Melville as a supervisor took place in Cuballing, Narrogin and Manjimup. These occasions gave opportunities for the church families to celebrate the achievements of graduates and to share the joy with their families and friends.

During her visitations to many congregations, Rev Ruth Vertigan notes that as rural landscapes change as farms

become larger and fewer, and towns shrink for various reasons, many churches are evolving modified forms of worship and meeting, and ways of contributing to their communities that can be inspirational and encouraging for others. Leadership can come from communities who face their situation as it is, and recognise that what is happening in our churches reflects what is happening in society. A faith-filled response is based not on fear of the future but in confident, prayerful discernment of 'what next?'

Developing and/or promoting relevant education, training and leadership development

Under Rev Alistair Melville's initiative four years ago, the end of last year (2016) saw ten completed ACOM certificate IVs in Christian Ministry and Theology and now eight people are equipped to take leadership positions in the Narrogin and Warren-Blackwood Clusters. The other two have moved to other areas and are using their new skills in their new settings. The ACOM course provided an opportunity for people to further their education in the rural setting and positively forced many of the participants to learn new skills in digital technology. Part of this four-year plan was to create a Pastor position for Pastor Kristin Grainger to oversee the Warren-Blackwood cluster. Through this forward planning the Warren-Blackwood Cluster is a good example for other congregations facing change and possible closure. It gives hope

for new beginnings and new expressions of the Church.

We identified the need for sacrament training for lay leaders in rural areas at the end of last year. The Rural Ministry team is currently involved, with the Commission for Education for Discipleship and Leadership (CEDAL), in providing training for Lay Presiders of the Sacraments. Authority for Lay Presiders lasts for two years and a large number of people require refresher training at the moment. We are also liaising with others who are providing Code of Ethics and Safe Church training to equip congregations with good stewardship.

At the request of this committee Rev Alistair Melville, who previously worked with transforming small rural congregations into alternate worship communities without the burden of having to maintain church buildings, is compiling resources for future congregations looking to make similar transformations. It is hoped that these resources will assist other congregations wishing to make a similar transformation and help them to celebrate the history of the congregation.

Promoting a culture of faith formation and faith sharing

At Summer Spirit, two of the graduates from Narrogin, Jenny Pollard and Margaret White presented a one-hour workshop on preaching which was a way of demonstrating their skills and confidence acquired from the Certificate

IV course. The presentation was well received with many favourable comments given afterwards regarding the quality and content.

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We are planning a Country Congregations Confab again, possibly in Kellerberrin, being reasonably central, on the second weekend of August. A request was made by some congregations for this to be a spiritual retreat. It is still in the early stages of planning but by working with CEDAL and regional ministers, we would like to provide opportunities for participants to explore, form and share their Christian spirituality and tools to guide others.

Looking ahead

Rural ministry in WA is changing. As we review the Rules for the Committee and reconsider the definition and responsibilities in the light of new circumstances, fresh ideas are emerging. It will take some time for these to clarify.

However, it is clear that it is time for the church in WA to recognise and learn from what is happening in rural churches. We believe Rural ministry includes all ministry in rural areas whether or not there is ordained or commissioned Ministers in placement. Support for rural churches may need to take new forms to be more effective.

We note, too, that issues faced by small congregations are often similar, whether in suburban or rural areas and innovative experiences can be shared with other parts of the church.