

RURAL MINISTRY GROUP ANNUAL REPORT 2008

MEMBERSHIP

Catherine Blake	Cath Lacey sm
Judy Breen rsm	Bernadette Madden mss
Madeline Breen rsm	Virginia Mahony rsc
Pat Bundock op	Anne Mayberry rsc
Kay Cole rsm	Frances McAleer rsj
Margaret Anne Crowe rsm	Colleen McDonald rsc
Maria Cunningham rsc	Joan McKenna rsc
Joy Mary Edwards	Ann McRae pbvm Animator
Joan Farrell rsj	Marie Murphy rsm
Margaret Fitzgerald rsc	Colleen Noonan rsc
Marjorie Fitzgerald rsm	Bernadette Pattison pbvm
Kate Fitzpatrick rsc	Carol Pedersen rsc
Anne Forbes rsm	Carmel Piffero
Clare Gaynor pbvm	Carmel Sheridan rsj
Margaret Anne Hart rsm	Fran & John Spora
Joanna Healy osu	Ann Steenbergen rsj
Christine Henry rsc	Patricia Vagg rsm
Margaret Kelly rsm	Maria Wheeler rsc
Marguerita Kosseris csb	Pat Whitby csb

FOCUS

The Rural Ministry Group is a support network for religious and their colleagues in often isolated ministry in rural New South Wales, Victoria and southern Queensland. The animator of the group, Ann McRae pbvm, lives in Wagga. The group communicates mostly by email and meets only infrequently, often at gatherings instituted by other organizations.

RURAL MINISTRY GATHERINGS

Fran and John Spora chose Yanco in 1998 as the location of the very first gathering of sisters and co-workers engaged in rural ministry. In 2002, the Year of the Outback, the Rural Ministry Group inaugurated their biennial weekend gatherings. In 2002 and 2004 the group met in Carcoar and in 2006 at Galong. March 28-30, 2008 was the date of our most recent gathering, again at Galong. Virginia Mahoney rsc, Maria Cunningham rsc and Margaret Anne Crow rsm offered to coordinate the 2008 Gathering. Advertising for the Gathering occurred through CLRI(NSW) and was widened to include CRAV and CRAQ. The presenters for our theme of **Creation at Work** were

- Rev Charles Rue ssc - Faith and Ecology
- Rev Pat Corbet CSsR - Cosmic Walk and Care of the Earth at Galong
- Sr Helen Barnes rsj - Storyteller / Clown.

Twenty women gathered for a weekend that offered opportunities to release the inner clown and the inner artist, to update on sustainability, to walk the Sacred Circle at Galong, to pray together, celebrate together and share the challenges and richness of

ministry in a rural setting. Some of the resolutions we made in evaluating the weekend were:

- CLRI(NSW) would supply organizational support for future weekends, lightening the burden for the organizing group;
- Ann McRae pbvm would attend a CLRI(NSW) Executive Committee meeting each year to keep members in the loop about conditions faced by religious ministering in rural areas;
- The Rural Ministry Group page on the CLRI(NSW) website www.clrinsw.org will display material from the gatherings as well as resource material for group members;
- A photo gallery will be included on the Rural Ministry Group page;
- A Google Group will be established to enable members of the Rural Ministry Group to communicate with one another easily and share resources and ideas. This has not been successful because of the slowness of rural dial-up internet connection and so another message board format will begin in 2009;
- Our next gathering will be at Galong in 2010.

REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2008

Ann McRae pbvm spoke at length about the role of sisters and their co-workers in rural ministry. Sisters provide a presence in a community, which grieves when that presence is withdrawn for whatever reason. Pastoral care of farm and town dwellers is an important facet of rural ministry. Rural Outreach is another aspect, comprising farm visits and work with service agencies to assist rural dwellers who may be unaware of or unwilling to access services that may assist the family unit to cope with the exigencies of life on the land –in times of drought, rural downturn or other hardships.

The report highlighted some of the major issues for farmers in 2008:

- massive paperwork to comply with legislation [OH&S, chemical/fertiliser/pesticide use, machinery handling, operator licensing, insurance, truck driving]
- consistent learning curve about new cropping and animal husbandry methods/improvements/legislation
- new environmental imperatives: water use, land degradation, salt intrusion, genetically modified crops, feedlots, caged fowl etc
- the perceived criticism by city dwellers who view farmers as environmentally destructive, or at best, naïve
- cost of fuel for farm machinery and trips to town
- town often further away: the local town loses business services which have then to be accessed in more distant towns requiring more time off the farm and more fuel
- *Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment or Interim Income Support* from Centrelink available only to farmers with an overdraft: older, traditional farmers do not go into overdraft –they do without

- drought payments cease when rain falls –but recovery is not instant or always widespread
- Federal Government buy back of water leases and farms, returning water to the river systems and converting the farms to national parks. Farming controls plant and animal pests: who will control both in future and what will the impact be on adjoining farms?
- a grasshopper plague is imminent
- equine influenza aftermath still impacting on some rural communities eg Scone
- double and triple roles result in burnout: women on the land often run the farm and family alone while their husband works away driving trucks, for example, or they work in town themselves for a regular income. Families are split for the sake of a regular income Many women are on constant suicide watch –checking that their husband is not overcome by the difficulties he faces
- when city dwellers move to country towns through Department of Housing initiatives, they often bring a drug culture than then impacts on the young people in the town which has no services to attend to drug addiction and related health and community problems.

The report indicated the role of sisters and co-workers in rural areas includes

1. ensuring that farming families are aware of all potential Centrelink benefits and encouraging/assisting the family to access the benefits
2. connecting farming families with any services that are available in the town
3. dealing with agencies in towns so that the services provided for farming families are appropriate
4. being the **only religious** presence –not the **only Catholic** presence, but the **only religious** as, like all other town services, churches and personnel leave town
5. being the listener, the hearer of the stories –often the only listening ear
6. providing prayer services for funerals and Sundays when there is no priest [a priest may travel to the area and say one Mass: what of funerals/reconciliation/other sacraments? What of the cultural and language mismatch of priests sourced overseas?- the cultural/language mismatch is much greater in the country than metropolitan areas]
7. providing support/accessing professional services for families in the area of mental health [rural mental health services are funded only until June 2009 –hard to get and keep suitable staff when funding is insecure] and family therapy
8. providing support/accessing professional services for the children of rural families who carry the tension of the situation of the parents and the farm and whose physical, mental or sexual health is unattended and whose educational prospects may be poor
9. accepting employment as a School Chaplain with the current Federal Government program of funded School Chaplains to receive some income.

The Executive Committee in response to this report resolved the following action could be taken by congregations and CLRI(NSW) to assist religious in rural ministry:

1. Provision of professional training/education opportunities for sisters and their co-workers in rural areas
2. Provision of supervision for sisters and their co-workers in rural areas, or by telephone
3. Providing retreat weekends for rural dwellers in country areas
4. Provision of grief and loss seminars for rural dwellers in country towns
5. Identification of religious who might move to a country town for a set period
6. Identification of committed lay professionals who might give 2-5 years service as leader of a rural community
7. Advertisement of towns with the greatest need for information of congregational leaders
8. Encouragement of inter-congregational supply of personnel to a town
9. Provision of pamper packs for women on the land via donations
10. Provision of money via donations so that sisters and their co-workers in rural areas have some leeway to give financial assistance to families in dire need
11. Ways could be sought to promote the concerns of rural dwellers with government eg making a submission to the National Review of Drought
12. Promoting, through the Social Justice Committee of CLRI(NSW), the environmental concerns of rural dwellers to government eg coal mining on the Liverpool Plains
13. Seeking support from congregational schools with ex-students in the country –rebuilding networks and giving support
14. Seeking support from congregational members with ex-students in the country – rebuilding connections and giving support
15. Provision of information about rural areas to metropolitan religious
16. Promote the stories/needs of rural dwellers: CRA phone interviews sisters in rural ministry.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Do you have a congregational member in rural ministry who would like to join the group? Do you have any congregational members who might be suitable for a year or two of rural ministry? Do you have a congregational member who might be suitable to join an inter-congregational ministry to a rural area? Do you have a congregational member who would give a weekend retreat in a rural area? Do you have a congregational member who would be able to offer phone or face-to-face supervision for rural ministers? Do you have a congregational member who would be able to offer a weekend grief and loss seminar in a rural area? Do you have a congregational member who would be able to offer a professional training/education seminar for rural ministers? If there is something you can do to help, please contact Sharon Price at CLRI(NSW).

Ann McRae pbvm
Animator, Rural Ministry Group
December 1, 2008