Are there key features that characterise appropriate styles of leadership for rural congregations in South Australia?

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

That life in a country town is different to life in a capital city's suburbs is universally acknowledged, but the ways in which these differences manifest in the styles of leadership appropriate to local churches appears less well understood. This study explores those differences and it seeks to present them in ways that might be helpful to placements committees within Uniting Church presbyteries and to ministers seeking to move from a suburban to a rural placement. Such leaders in ministry must be willing to learn and embrace the specific ways in which life is different in rural areas and what the implications of those differences are on the ways in which ministry is gone about. A literature review was undertaken and expanded from the wisdom of former and current practitioners of rural and urban ministries in South Australia. What was found was that whilst it is thought preferable to have ordained leaders in congregations it is better to have appropriately trained local lay members presiding than to bring in an accredited stranger. Where an ordained minister is present he/she is most effective when he/she acts primarily in the mode of dialogue partner and facilitator of the congregation's ministry rather than as a resident theologian or expert. It is vital that local lay members are empowered to serve and lead their congregations, therefore a catalytic style of leadership is the best fit since rural placements often do not last long enough for ongoing mentorships to be effective. The minister must enable and equip the local people such that when he/she departs to take up a placement elsewhere the ministry is not left without direction or directors. Ministers within rural communities are expected by their congregations to serve and comfort the community beyond the church; a rural minister, isolated from other ministers, may be the only person available to fill the many representative roles required, therefore he/she must have a preparedness and a willingness to do so. It was also found that ministers in isolated placements need to take greater personal responsibility for their own and their family's self-care and resilience than urban ministers who tend to have support networks closer-by. Whilst the majority of people who live in rural areas are socially and theologically conservative this is by no means the case for everybody. The minister must be able to lead the whole congregation in discipleship and learning with respect for every person's theology and worldview whilst simultaneously upholding the distinctive flavour and form of the Uniting Church.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: 

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1. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AS A METHOD OF QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

The nature of practical theology is that it is more concerned with performing the Christian faith than it is with simply talking or reading about it, and with exploring the merit of that performance.[1] It examines the notion that faith is something to be lived and enacted, rather than simply believed, and it explores how living faith is gone about.[2] Swinton and Mowat define Practical Theology as "critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world".[3] It is the study of the practices of Christians and the world in which Christians live and might be compared with the way in which Systematic Theology is concerned with the stated beliefs and sacred traditions of Christians.[4] Practical Theology is theoretical in that it is the pursuit of an understanding of Christian practice,[5] yet it is also practical in that it seeks to inform and transform future Christian practice.[6]

Practical Theology is critical in that it offers a means of reflective critique upon the practices of the Church with regard to discovering the meaningfulness of these practices and to challenging unhelpful and inaccurate assumptions.[7] The means of engaging in Practical Theology are always employed with an eye to the context of the practices, noting that different human activities produce different experiences of God.[8] It is for this reason that a research project such as mine cannot be based on literature study alone but must include conversations with active ministry practitioners.

[1] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,* (SCM Press: London, 2006) 4.
[2] ibid, 5.
[3] ibid, 6.
[4] ibid, 11.
[5] ibid.
[6] ibid, 12.
[7] ibid, 7.
[8] ibid.

Practical Theology is theological in that it assumes that theology is the primary source of knowledge and as such theology guides and shapes the hermeneutical tasks of the research project.[9]

Practical Theology examines the practices of the Church and the practices of the world, exploring the ways in which these two areas of reality interact within the boundaries of the study environment,[10] which is to say special attention is paid to how the Church interacts with its community and how God is seen to act within the Creation.[11] Since the universe cannot exist without God and the Church cannot exist without the universe it is important to keep these parameters in place when observing and reporting on the activities of Christian life.[12] In this way the Church is reminded of the ways in which it operates in the world whilst not being identical to the world since the Church is of God.[13] Rural congregations are based in rural communities, therefore the nature of life amongst rural mindsets and rural circumstances must be included in any conversation of the ways and means of being the community of Christ in non-urban areas.

Practical Theology speaks toward the Church's faithful outworking of the gospel[14] in that is describes a "do-able" understanding of God.

Practical Theology operates in all things through a hermeneutical lens of suspicion.[15] It is unashamedly concerned with a search for truth and assumes the reality of ultimate truth;[16] nevertheless, it also assumes the fallen-ness of Creation and the uncertainty inherent to human endeavours toward human understanding.[17]

Swinton and Mowat state that for them the critical necessity of practical theology is found in its corrective task of identifying aberrant practice and

[9] ibid.
[10] ibid.
[11] ibid, 8.
[12] ibid.
[13] ibid, 9.
[14] ibid.
[15] ibid, 10.
[16] ibid, 11.
[17] ibid, 10.

drawing this to the attention of the Church so as to enable it to engage more fruitfully, and more faithfully, with the mission of God.[18] It is for this reason that I chose to employ the method of Practical Theology to conduct my investigation. By attending to the connections between theological understandings and ministry practices of the Church practical theologians ensure that what it performed in God's name is actually consistent with the character and mission of God.[19] In this way practical theology examines the beliefs and understandings that underpin Christian practice and it informs the development of new practices by suggesting new understandings.[20]

Practical theology takes place within the methodology of theology,[21] which is to say it looks out from a worldview in which God exists and reigns. There is conflict between the methodology and some of the methods that other qualitative researchers following an interpretive and hermeneutic paradigm might otherwise have wished to utilise.[22] This is so because the world cannot be thought of as an entirely social construct if it was created by a purposeful God, and if there is foundational truth in the personal revelation of Jesus Christ then truth is not relative and open to untrammelled interpretation. It is within these paradigms that I chose to work.

My intention had been to interview current ministers who have served in both rural and suburban/urban congregations and to compare and analyse their comments in the light of my literature review. Administrative delays in my being granted Final Approval for Ethics Clearance meant that I was unable to undertake those interviews within the timeframe established for the research task. As a result of this I chose to confine myself to an extended literature review with further insight gained through conversations with leading, local authorities. These local authorities consisted of authors of several of my source readings, as well as ministry practice leaders of the Presbytery of South Australia in the Uniting Church in Australia, and to ministerial teaching staff at

[18] ibid, 25.
[19] ibid.
[20] ibid, 26.
[21] ibid, 76.
[22] ibid.

Uniting College of Leadership and Theology at the Adelaide College of Divinity, each of whom had also ministered in both rural and suburban congregations.

2. LIFE AS A LEADER IN THE CHURCH

An introduction to Theories of Leadership

In researching forms of leadership, I chose to read the work of Nell and Nell[23] because they engaged directly with theological students from rural backgrounds studying at a major university in an urban centre with the expectation of returning to their home nation to minister. From this work four broad categories of leadership theories were presented:

a. Essentialist theories focus upon the traits and behaviours, and person and identity of the key leader. We might think of such theories as focussing upon the formation of the student as a Christian as well as a leader.
b. Critical theories focus on the idea that leadership is about maintaining power and status at the expense of empowering and encouraging others. This may appear to be all negative, yet there are times when it is important to have decisive leadership to make quick decisions without the need for consultation and this sort of leadership comes to the fore.
c. Relational theories focus on the relationship between leaders and followers and the distribution of expertise and influence amongst them. In their African context Nell and Nell describe such collectivist models as *Ubuntu*, that a person is a person only through interaction with others[24]. I will show later that the capacity of a rural minister to engage with his or her community is vital to effective ministry.
d. Constructionist theories focus on the construction of meaning through leadership and the ways in which situations are made sense of through narratives that reframe understandings and suggest solutions to problems. At the end of this chapter I shall engage with change-management as a specific focus for leadership in rural communities.

Responses to specific questions were analysed, coded and gathered into themes by Nell and Nell. In response to one question concerning what makes a local congregation uniquely effective when contrasted with neighbouring congregations four keys came to the fore.

[23] Ian Nell and Elzette Nell, "The Changing Landscape in Religious Leadership: Reflections from Rural African Faith Communities" in *Rural Theology 12/1* (May 2014), 30.
[24] ibid.

a. Their churches were seen by the students as places of intimate relations that strengthen the sense of community.[25] Nell and Nell drew connections between *Ubuntu* and the Greek concept of *koinonia*, identifying the churches as places of care and attention to the world and the people in it. I shall explore this strong sense of shared community amongst rural Australians in chapter four.
b. The churches were seen as bodies that carried culture and values.[26] There was an expressed sense of ownership through participation in rituals and an understanding that theology is done best through community worship.
c. The churches were seen as promoters of care, health and wellbeing for the community, not just for themselves.[27] Parallels might be drawn here with the work of Olney and Burton in their investigation of how the local church contributes to a rural community's social capital.[28]
d. The churches were seen as developers of community,[29] engaging in projects for the benefit of the village and sharing the wisdom of the wise with all.[30]

A further question was examined by Nell and Nell concerning the image of the ministry leader in the community. Once again four keys were represented in the students' responses.

a. The pastor is the chosen one.[31] He or she is set apart by God to serve the needs of the community and keep the welfare of the community at the forefront of his or her thinking. The pastor is a counsellor, teacher, comforter and leader who is strong in his or her task when the vision of God is strong. Leadership within a community means being chosen and called out.
b. The pastor is the one with power and authority.[32] This need not be a dominating idea, merely that this leader is one who is recognised as carrying the responsibility to guide the community. Various roles within

[25] ibid, 35.
[26] ibid, 36.
[27] ibid.
[28] See chapter four.
[29] ibid.
[30] ibid, 37.
[31] ibid.
[32] ibid.

this were suggested such as teaching elder, solver of conflict, chairperson of meetings, and the one who leads by example by practising what is preached. There was also a sense in which the pastor was a maker of things, a producer and setter of culture through his or her role as key decision maker[33] and facilitator of decision-making councils. Leadership within a community means being relational, demonstrating belonging, engaging in fellowship, and taking care of others.

c. The pastor is a servant and comforter to the community beyond the church.[34] The pastor is active in engagement with the community, notably working amongst the suffering and bereaved with the gospel. Leadership within a community means serving.
d. The pastor is a sage and educator, the sharer of wisdom and the one who educates others.[35] The pastor is like a parent, the one who should be consulted in view of his or her wisdom and insight. The pastor understands the culture and learns it and is therefore one who might be approached for advice. Several students described the role of pastor in their community with the local language word for "teacher", also conveying a sense of the wise mother/father who must be consulted. Leadership within a community is pedagogical because the leader helps people to construct meaning.

When I invited him to comment upon the various images of leaders in ministry, Rev Dr Nicholas Hawkes, the pastor of an inter-denominational Christian ministry in South Australia, suggested that engaging with community leadership from the perspective of being the resident theologian or expert can be somewhat self-aggrandising and therefore not at all helpful.[36] Christ's model of leadership wherein the leader comes as a servant and companion on the road; engaging in dialogue with the people[37] is a far better framework in which to operate. Hawkes went on to say that decisive leadership is necessary at times, but that this should not be from the role of expert but from the station

[33] ibid, 38.
[34] ibid.
[35] ibid.
[36] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[37] ibid.

as community leader.[38] The nature of denominational allocation of ministers has been said to offer the minister a place as the visiting chaplain to the community: in this context at least he or she is a temporary agent of the denominational Church and not one of the people.[39] That said, it remains true of many people in rural congregations that they want their minister to be like the ones described by Nell and Nell: theory is one thing but reality is quite another.

The rural pastor must be a Jill-of-all-trades and the mistress-of all;[40] this is very different to what is expected and required in the suburbs.[41] One example of a uniquely rural leadership dilemma, offered by Fran Schnarre, highlighted the scenario of doing mission work in a district where the entire population is decreasing, even when those who are still in church have not left.[42] (i.e. the church is not shrinking but the town is.) In this context the work of the out-the-front leader is to speak of how God continues to bring wisdom to the Church and to help the people to hear what the Spirit is saying to them[43]. Reverend Sue Ellis, a minister of the Uniting Church in South Australia, observed that whilst it is the task of everyone to listen and discern, that for her as the ordained leader she understands that "God has called these people; it is my job to lead them".

When asked about the role of the minister amongst the people rather than out from them, Craig Bailey of Adelaide College of Divinity[44] spoke of his preference for the idea of the leader as catalyst, not mentor. Mentorship suggested to him a longevity of alongsideness whereas a catalyst is present for a short time to get the change happening and then steps back while progress continues ahead. In this Bailey agrees with Hawkes in suggesting that the role of the minister as leader whether out front or from within the people is temporary. The two situations are not so discretely distinct as might have

[38] ibid.
[39] ibid.
[40] Fran Schnarre, "Equipping Leaders for Rural Ministry" *Australian Leadership 7/2* (August-September 2014): 19.
[41] ibid.
[42] ibid.
[43] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[44] Craig Bailey, pers. con., June 3, 2016.

been thought, rather effective leadership is a free-flowing movement between the two.

In response to the situation of many Australian rural churches that struggle to find anyone who is prepared to offer leadership, either through lack of ordained candidates or lack of suitable lay volunteers to step up locally, Hughes and Kunciunas[45] offered options for finding solutions. Two key styles of operation covered these methods, those of engaging lay persons in local leadership, and those of stretching the available clergy to cover a wider area through offering reduced services across the district rather than full service in one location and none at another.[46]

1. Ministry through ecumenical cooperation involves sharing ministers and buildings across similarly-minded denominations in a local area.[47] In this way one larger congregation of Christians gathers together rather than several smaller ones with the benefit of having a larger group of people attuned to common mission plans as well as demonstrating the unity of the Christian faith. There is joy when the combined resources of several denominations can provide for a full-time ministry placement where each denomination could not have offered this on its own. The downside of this witness to unity can be seen in different understandings of sacraments across denominational traditions, different styles of churchmanship evident in worship, and different ways of relating with the wider church through synodical structures.[48]
2. Ministry through a local leadership team involves the whole community in ministry through the activity of a small coordinating team.[49] This form of ministry leadership has the benefit of local people meeting local needs with wisdom and insight but can be limited by the experience and training of these people when compared with the training of external, stipended clergy. Some people in churches do not like lay leadership

[45] Philip Hughes and Audra Kunciunas, *Sowing and Nurturing: Challenges and Possibilities for Rural Churches,* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association, 2009), 11.
[46] ibid.
[47] ibid, 12.
[48] ibid.
[49] ibid, 13.

unless it occurs under the covering of an overall clergy person, and others might struggle with their local peers being in authority.[50]

3. Ministry through a resourcing minister involves the lay-lead scheme above but puts it under the cover of a synod appointed enabling minister who is charged with the care of several lay-lead ministry teams across a geographical area.[51] In this way stipended clergy become enablers and trainers of teams of lay leaders rather than preachers and celebrants in their own congregations, meeting some of the challenges of the local leadership team that might otherwise have been on its own. Local ministry teams are engaged in networking with other congregations in the same situation while at the same time keeping the local people in their locale, the place they know best. The challenges faced by churches engaging in this form of leadership include the added time required of lay leaders to attend training and mentoring sessions as well as the ordinary running of church. The issue of lay people in leadership, even if they are trained and mentored, will not necessarily overcome the preference of those members of the congregation who want ordained clergy.[52]
4. Ministry through a team of stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministers, complemented by local lay leaders, addresses some of the issues detailed above. In this way ordained clergy do preach and celebrate sacraments with the people as well as offering training and pastoral support to local lay leaders.[53] What might be found challenging is the need for local people to develop pastoral relationships with a number of visiting, circuit ministers rather than a single congregational or parish minister.[54]
5. Integrated ministries, where a local congregation also operates a school or welfare agency, often have the financial resources to pay a stipended clergy person who is also employed as a teacher, chaplain or counsellor.[55] This is the manner in which many Salvation Army local churches operate and many of them have seen the fellowship and faith

[50] ibid.
[51] ibid, 14.
[52] ibid.
[53] ibid, 15.
[54] ibid.
[55] ibid, 16.

of the congregation strengthened by the church's work in the world as an integral part of its meeting.[56] Such ministries face the challenge of finding suitable bi-vocational leaders, ministers who are also skilled in welfare or education, and in the utilisation of property. It is necessary that key staff of the agency are willing to work within a Christian community setting[57] and that the worshipping community recognises the needs of the agency in terms of accessibility and welcome.

6. Ministry through regional mission involves local churches working together to create a single hub for outreach and mission when the disparate congregations might struggle alone to do more than keep the doors open on a Sunday.[58] This could look like the integrated ministries model involving more than one local congregation (or parish) with several agencies or activities in operation. Barriers to such ministries include the substantial amount of money required at the outset of such a ministry and the need for reliable ongoing funding, and the sense in which a larger regional church might be seen to draw people away from small local congregations.[59]
7. Ministry through house churches or ecclesial (e.g. New Monastic) communities involves diverse meeting places for small fellowships that are usually lay-lead.[60] Such groups exist for members and so are cost efficient and highly flexible and mobile, aspects that might be attractive to seekers after Christ who have been turned off by the institutions of formalised denominational modes of belonging. On the downside such informal groups are very dependent upon their leaders for stability and they can become isolated from the wider life of the Body of Christ.[61] It can be very difficult for house churches to engage in large-scale mission projects[62] unless as an aspect of integrated ministry.
8. Ministry through fresh expressions of faith life can be successful. Cafe Church[63] as a new way of doing worship life operates to build community through the provision of a common or third space for people

[56] ibid.
[57] ibid.
[58] ibid, 17.
[59] ibid.
[60] ibid, 18.
[61] ibid.
[62] ibid.
[63] ibid, 19.

to meet. In a small village such as North Pickenham where I lived in 2002-2003 such events might be very welcome by the community. Cell churches and Mission Shaped Community churches can work well as a means of linking house churches, either to each other or to a parish church. Such churches might like to ask after the sectors of the local community whom the local church might serve,[64] perhaps looking for gaps in provision in terms of demographic factors, common interests, time and place factors (who cannot make a Sunday morning), and how best to meet the needs of people who might be more AV or discussion minded than the Sunday morning oration-and-songs style.[65] In the same way multimedia links might be used to connect isolated communities of worship via Google Hangout or Adobe Connect.

In a recent study of Local Shared Ministry (LSM) centred upon rural parish work in the Anglican Diocese of Waiapu (New Zealand) Bill Bennet spoke of influence from the Maori stream of leadership within Aotearoa New Zealand's Anglican tradition.[66] Maori elders identified as leaders in their local congregations are ordained as ministers for their local community. In a similar way Pakeha (European) lay leaders are identified and equipped to act within their home congregation: indeed, in one congregation a lay-lead local mission partnership was established with their local Presbyterian congregation.[67] According to the Bishop of Waiapu the mission of LSM is to make connections and build up relationships between local Christians and their community; it's not primarily about getting people into Sunday church.[68] It was about revealing where God is already alive and at work among the local people. However, this movement brings with it a cautionary tale and Bennett spoke of what he called a "salutary rain check"[69] on the LSM model that occurred roughly ten years from the project's being initiated. What had begun with excitement around the local ministry of all baptised members with regard to community needs became a means for ensuring the economic survival of the parish.[70] What had once

[64] ibid, 21.
[65] ibid.
[66] Bill Bennett, "Changing Perspectives in the Church's Mission: A Progress Report on Rural Ministry in Ruahine, Aotearoa New Zealand" in *Rural Theology 13/2 (November 2015):* 107.
[67] ibid.
[68] ibid, 111.
[69] ibid, 107.
[70] ibid.

been inspiring, exciting and engaging became bogged down in politics around demarcation of local roles and authority, and debates concerning the equivalence of status between stipendiary ordained parish clergy and LSM leaders.[71] Some LSM priests and deacons felt that they were being asked to operate at levels beyond the remit of their office and its equipping.[72]

Leadership as Change Management

There is a rising need for rural congregations to manage change well. Hawkes observed that "there is no such thing as the status quo any more",[73] the pace of change has become so rapid that change is continuous and there is no longer a time when things stay the same. To move to stop change at a location is to stop growing and very quickly to move backwards as change continues all around the static church or idea. Therefore, alongside its mandate to seek God's justice in the world rural congregations must concern themselves with managing change and matching internal change with the realities of a changing world. Therefore, to grow a congregation its leaders must become agents of change. Kris Tenny-Brittian suggests that the minister needs to collaborate with the laity, those members of the congregation who bear long-term wisdom born of local experience, but that this source of critical insight needs to be balanced against the inherent subjectivity of a localised viewpoint.[74] The "buck stops" with the minister and it is he or she who can offer the objectivity of one step's removal from local history and praxis.

Change is required but the need for change need not, indeed should not,[75] be presented by recourse to fear tactics.[76] It might be true that the tide against change is too great, but fear will not shift this, and the community may have greater need for palliative care than for agency of change. Why waste your talent for change on such an endeavour, asks Tenny-Brittian,[77] when surely it is better to articulate the need for change by enabling the envisioning of a

[71] ibid.
[72] ibid, 108.
[73] Nicholas Hawkes, *The Country Is Different: Ministry and Hope for Rural Australia,* (Melbourne: JBCE, 1995), 67.
[74] Kris Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" *Australian Leadership 7/5 (*February-March 2015): 26.
[75] Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard.* (New York: Crown Business, 2010), 121.
[76] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2015), 27.
[77] ibid.

better future rather than through the need to avoid an undesirable one. Play to win, not to avoid losing.

Leadership in changeable times is pastoral care, not vision-casting.[78] When the focus of making change happen switches to the creativity of the followers rather than the fiat of the boss distress is caused across the entire organisation. It seems counter intuitive to ask people to operate out of their comfort zones and to speak boldly to leaders, or to ask leaders to listen respectfully to followers, yet this is vital in the time of transformation.[79] When the leader refuses to stroke the "fat cats" any longer, those followers who wish only to be comforted and pandered to, but asks them to find the answers to the tough questions of change and existence in a new world the "cats" themselves can be (must be) disoriented. Such people must be looked after even as the task of the leader has been to disturb the comfortable so as to get them moving forward,[80]

Sustainable change is a team effort; it cannot be achieved by the minister alone.[81] For change to be sustained it must involve the culture-setters, those people who influence whether they have a formal role on council or not. Identify those amongst these people who will be easily won to the side of change, and do not worry about the naysayers yet.[82] At the same time the minister must find strategists and tacticians who will help him/her to draw up and map out the change.[83]

[78] Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, "The Work of Leadership" in *Harvard Business Review* (December 2001) 4.
[79] ibid.
[80] ibid.
[81] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2015), 27.
[82] ibid.
[83] ibid.

3. LIFE AMIDST PRIMARY PRODUCERS

Reverend Nicholas Hawkes reported to me that when he took up his first rural settlement as a Uniting Church minister he arrived knowing that he "did not understand the theology and sociology of a country town".[84] Thirty years later Nick believes that it remains the case that many South Australian ministers taking up their first rural appointment do not understand their context as well as they could since many of them arrive from previously suburban-based lives. Such a position leads, in Nick's words, to "a whole stack of missed opportunities through carelessness in understanding the culture".[85]

Rural theologies must encounter rural people: people who work day to day with their hands and with the elements far more than they do with abstracts ideas. An interventionist God whose interest is in care for friend and neighbour and who challenges Christians to be the same is what drives local ministry far more than philosophical conceptualisation.[86] Hughes notes that theology colleges seem to favour abstraction, which leads to disconnect between minister and community when he/she comes with such ideas about God.[87] Far less time is spent in theology colleges helping trainee ministers to make connections with the real people amongst whom they serve.[88] Ministers who come with a mindset of wanting to change the rational thinking of their people in the name of abstraction miss the point of ministry. Any engagement with ideas of God must be established on the world-view of the people, with education drawing them onward and outward, rather than the scholar from the city simply imposing his/her philosophical world-view.[89] The people must never be thought of as uneducated hicks when what they are expressing is real world, practical, pastorally responsible faith in a God who is nearby.

When speaking of the specific context of life amidst primary producers it is important to remember that less people are becoming involved in farming than

[84] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[85] ibid.
[86] Philip Hughes, "Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia: uniting churches in South Australia" in *Rural Theology* 8/1 (November 2010): 19.
[87] ibid.
[88] ibid.
[89] ibid.

was once the case and that rural districts are typified now by sets of multiple farms farmed by one person. In many places one farm per farmer is no longer viable, but four farms under one farmer is, while three farmers move in to town or move away entirely. Fewer people in the district actively work the land, and there are less people in the town over all. This is especially true for the districts in South Australia where I have lived where a significant portion of rural districts are no longer actively agricultural but exist for tourism. Many people living in country towns are not the long-term families, and many have indeed arrived within the last ten, if not five years.[90] There are newcomers who are not part of the "everybody" at all, they are not even known by their neighbours let alone the majority of the population of the high street. Indeed, such people might well have moved from the suburbs so as to have more space and they do not want to be encroached upon.[91] From a literary perspective rural districts have become "landscape"; they are not wilderness untouched by humankind, or farmland shaped by human industry, rather they are places of beauty shaped by human delight. The bush is now the place where people come to encounter the non-human world, to meet with God and be reminded of humanity's place in the grand scheme of creation.[92]

For reasons of beauty and of industry it is my experience that rural people are often more closely tied to their homes than urban dwellers, and as Hawkes said this is especially true for families that have farmed (or at least lived on) the same patch of land for generations.[93] There is a sense of belongingness that is more than just ownership or familiarity, there is also a sense of care and responsibility for the land as a long-term partner. Rural communities are oftentimes slower to embrace change and are more resistant to it because of this longer-term investment in the land and the community that inhabits it.[94] Ministers must take time to sit and to hear the stories of the people and their country, or else their influence will be restricted and the people may choose to bide their time quietly until the next minister comes.[95]

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[90] Kris Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" *Australian Leadership 7/2* (August-September 2014): 27.
[91] ibid, 28.
[92] Tim Gibson, *Church and Countryside: Insights from Rural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 106.
[93] Hawkes, *The Country Is Different,* 80.
[94] ibid.
[95] ibid.

Farming in Australia is under threat since the ageing Baby Boomer generation is still leading the industry and managing the farms for the most part; the younger, fitter Generations X and Y have moved off the land to work in the regional centres and cities. There is an increasing age in the farming demographic, an increasing gap between urban and rural experiences of life, and an increase in what Hawkes calls "cultural cringe"[96] by which he meant a deepening sense of inferiority to urban dwellers. Farmers are now required to be savvy with the technologies of GPS guided harvesters and internet usage, yet these same farmers are in their 60s and 70s and many find it difficult to keep pace with these rapidly changing technologies.

In a related way there has been a shift in the ability of the local church to make a difference in its community: where once the Christians in town would involve themselves in making things happen the demographic is now much older and the Christians less able to perform the manual task themselves. It is common that local churches now engage in fundraising activities so as to pay contractors to do building or maintenance work that they once would have done themselves because the older people are incapable of doing labouring work.[97]

Farming has become an economically risky option in recent decades, meaning city-oriented banks are less likely to lend and more likely to foreclose on investments without a real understanding of how things operate in the bush.[98] The pastoral implications of this are that economic uncertainty fills the minds of many local people inside and outside the congregations necessitating a deepening need for care of worried and sometimes dispossessed people.

Marketing has changed. Where farmers used to market through the Wheat Boards they are now directly marketing to global suppliers, requiring them to be market savvy at a global level.[99] This is new, new even in the last 25 years

[96] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[97] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[98] Hawkes, *The Country Is Different,* 18.
[99] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.

since Nick wrote his book.[100] The implications of this are that farmers are now competing with their neighbours for sales rather than combining forces as part of the local cooperative, and that they are needing to spend more time in the office looking at the markets and speaking with brokers, time that used to be spent in the paddocks or even in the town.

The changing climate is of increasing concern. Successful farming is now a matter of diversification, not only in cropping. Total diversification might call for tourism and experience farms.[101] Hughes makes reference to the specific factor of South Australia's "Goyder Line" moving in a southward direction, indicating a drying of the land and a reduction in the area of land suitable for agriculture.[102] Farmers are receiving less recompense for their work such that an average farm now produces less than an average wage in annual profit.[103] Farmers are having to take second jobs or farm greater areas of land to provide for their families, meaning that some farmers are selling up to their neighbours and leaving the district while others are busy at second jobs and have less recreational time, including less time to attend church events. Many of the local communities in which Australia's rural churches participate are in decline due to sociological factors beyond the control of the Church.[104] Ministers must be aware of this: it is often perceived to be the case that people from the cities do not understand these factors and therefore do not care. It is not true that ministers coming from the suburbs or a larger regional centre do not care, but unless the ministers make the effort to find out and come to understand the people's need they will find it difficult to provide appropriate pastoral support.

It is a circumstance of life in rural areas that such locations are disproportionately high in premature death. Road traffic accidents and suicides[105] are more prevalent in rural than in suburban settings, and farm accidents (drowning, falls, equipment mishaps, bushfires, etcetera) add to the tally. For this reason, it is vital that the local minister has walked alongside

[100] ibid.
[101] ibid.
[102] Hughes, "Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia", 10.
[103] ibid.
[104] ibid, 9.
[105] Sue Ellis, "Some sow, another tends, and another harvests...," *Australian Leadership 7/2* (August-September 2014): 7.

families and community groups before tragedy strikes. The impact of any one death is widespread locally due to family and close community ties. Sue Ellis noted from her experience as a rural minister that it is often through funerals that a newly arrived minister will become well-known and that well presented funerals and bereavement care are vital for this reason. My experience supports this, as it does Ellis' comment that participation in support groups (e.g. cancer, suicide) and awareness days carries positive weight.[106] Deep relationships and deep connections forged before a tragedy strikes are the context for deep sharing of faith, care and nurture.

Schooling remains an aspiration gap for farmers; the best schools are in the regional centres or in Adelaide and this proves expensive when boarding is necessary. With many children away at school reduced resources for local education are leading to greater centralisation of education into larger town area schools and away from the smaller towns.[107] The work of parenting requires more time to service bus-runs and drop offs and many families are tired on Sundays, especially if there has been travel on Saturday to sports in other towns.[108] Children's and youth events might not be practicable in the absence of some children in the bigger towns and the tiredness of those who remain.

In rural settings there is often no choice of local church.[109] Unlike a small suburban church where there are usually alternatives in neighbouring suburbs in the bush it might be 50km or more to the next parish.[110] Local congregations exist with a deep sense of connectedness and generational patriarchy or matriarchy[111] that may lead to conflict and power-struggles due to underlying factions. New members of the congregation, including the minister's family, may find it hard to enter the tight-knit community, especially when charges of "favouritism" arise from different camps.

[106] ibid
[107] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[108] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14th, 2016.
[109] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[110] ibid.
[111] ibid.

Tenny-Brittian posits that the work of a rural minister in a diminishing community is primarily to rebuild that congregation's self-esteem and ability towards a place of hope.[112] She counsels ministers toward encouraging their people to dream big dreams and to envision reality with a plan.[113] Congregational leaders must overcome their own sense of hopelessness.[114] Hope-less people are hopeless leaders and can never lead a hopeful, hope-filled community. Hope-less people cannot lead a hope-less community back to hopefulness. Hawkes notes an advantage in that the pastor is an outsider and not set in the rut of the local ways, therefore he can ask "why not?" questions.[115] The role is one of advocacy and politics, representation and privilege.

It is evident that men who work on the land are more likely to chat over the back of a ute or leaning on a fence than they are over the kitchen table in the farmhouse, and that chat is even less likely in the manse or the church. Rural ministry involves visitation because to visit a person's place allows them to retain confidentiality and privacy in a situation where everyone already knows too much about everyone else's business.[116]

Hawkes observes a chronic malaise in rural Australia: there is long-term pain yet without a critical incident identifiable to others to cause this ongoing distress. Without a critical incident there is no critical incident debriefing and much rural pain goes unacknowledged and untreated.[117] The anguish felt by many people on the land is due to cumulative factors and this is misunderstood by outsiders. It might seem that without a discrete event nothing is identifiably wrong that might explain the malaise. It is therefore vital that ministers coming to provide care alongside those who work with the land understand that this is what is felt, that it is felt deeply, and that that is the reality in which many rural people are living.

[112] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2014), 28.
[113] ibid.
[114] ibid.
[115] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[116] Hawkes, *The Country Is Different,* 13.
[117] ibid, 58.

While it is true that rural producers have a significant impact on the ethos of small towns because these towns, at least initially, existed for rural production nevertheless, the non farmers in the community also effect the ethos of the place. The minister in a small, rural congregation will also encounter teachers, nurses, shop keepers, miners, and others who make up the town alongside the rural producers. In the next chapter I shall address the ministry and congregational needs of these people too.

4. LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN

The “rural idyll” is a myth and life in a small town doesn’t always live up to the myth. It is, however, a myth that many people continue to believe.[118] There remains some truth in it and it remains a considerable factor in the numbers of suburban people seeking a “tree change”. There might be disappointment in the expectations of newcomers to a rural district, wondering at the difference between reality and their idea of quaint and friendly country folk. (Where’s my weekly bucket of eggs from the neighbours?) Yet there remains an appeal in it amongst rural dwellers and as such the myth can be useful in discerning what locals want from community.[119]

The Uniting Church is the second largest denomination represented among South Australia’s rural people, just behind the Roman Catholic and ahead of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches.[120] Together these account for only 51.5% of the population, indicating that nearly one in two rural South Australians has no declared identification with any Christian tradition. When asked whether modern Christianity is better suited to towns and cities than to rural areas Hawkes remarked that Jesus was a rural person who spoke in farming metaphors.[121] When compared with our major city mega-churches and the realisation that Australia’s theological colleges and largest Christian bookstores are located in our state capitals it is good to be reminded of Jesus who spoke in non-complex yet deeply engaging language with the common people he met on the road and in the villages through which he passed.[122] According to Hawkes country people are unimpressed to be invited to the cities to attend city-centric conferences focussing practical theology around urban issues when the city churches show little to no concern for rural issues of justice and care.[123] The Church must act as a watchdog of justice, according to Hawkes, speaking in its public voice to advocate for fairness for the country because when a presbytery is heard speaking up for its bush constituents then

[118] Gibson. *Church and Countryside,* 20.
[119] ibid, 21.
[120] Hughes, “Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia”, 10.
[121] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 52.
[122] ibid.
[123] ibid, 64.

the local congregations in rural areas are better framed as allies by their local communities.[124]

Rural v Urban:

Rural communities differ from urban communities primarily in the ways in which rural life operates differently from urban life. Many rural workers are not 9-5 five days a week, forty-eight weeks a year jobs: some follow the growing seasons of the fruits, grains, animals and fish that they farm,[125] while others follow the 24/7 nature of mining or drilling work. Nonetheless the preconception that rural towns are static and occupied by dynasties of farming families is not entirely true. Hawkes observed that the rural church is no longer the centre of rural communities in the ways they were fifty years ago; churches are no longer the organisers or sole providers of local sports, charitable and service work, and childcare, youth and children's activities.[126] What roles remain for the church when socialisation and community fellowship have been taken from it? Ritual around the rites of passage remain a key role of the local rural church with the celebration of births, deaths, and marriages often taking place in what were once family churches and places that still hold celebratory significance.[127] For some non-attendees their local church is an important marker of community identity, it is the church they do not go to but that their grandparents did,[128] and if a synod or a presbytery tried to close it down they would soon rally to its defence. The rural church continues to play an important role in the local provision of pastoral care.[129]

A very real situation at the present time is that small towns are becoming extinct.[130] Some are being swallowed by suburban sprawl; others are having their essential services pulled by budget constraints in the state or local councils,[131] or in capital city boardrooms. Towns are closing down and shutting up. A lot of local energy is expended in trying to keep services (especially

[124] ibid, 68.
[125] ibid, 72.
[126] ibid, 1.
[127] ibid.
[128] ibid.
[129] ibid, 2.
[130] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2014), 27.
[131] ibid.

health and education) open.[132] Employers leave town,[133] not just individual small-business holders but chain-stores and industries costing the jobs of many. The reality for residents of many rural communities is the removal of services or the long term lack of them.[134] Services are increasingly being confined to capital cities and major regional towns with all other people offered an 1800 or 1300 number. But the question can be asked, from whom are the isolated and remote settlements isolated and remote? A rural posting is seen by some in the cities as a punishment or trial to be overcome, but for those who enjoy living where they do they are not remote at all.[135]

Many local churches in Australian rural communities are finding themselves ministering to ageing and diminishing congregations even as the costs of maintaining resident clergy are increasing.[136] They are being confronted with questions of how to source and fund appropriate leaders, how to engage with and attract younger people, and how to proclaim hope in a time of change and uncertainty.[137] They also face the same concerns as other resident agencies and people of rural Australia in the form of challenges to agriculture in the form of market factors, changing weather patterns and the diminishing viability of land for farming;[138] and declining rural populations.[139] In the face of these concerns some local churches have looked for ways to provide for community (through offering a venue and planning events), expressing their common sense of anxiety and celebration (through advocacy, prayer and community events), offering practical assistance, and reinforcing community norms and moral standards.[140]

Distance is a consideration for rural ministry that suburban ministries do not need to consider in the same way.[141] A Bible Study group might require a 100km return trip involving coming home in the dark when the kangaroos are out on the roads. Petrol costs, night-time driving on unlit roads, time away

[132] ibid.
[133] ibid.
[134] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 11.
[135] ibid.
[136] Hughes and Kunciunas. *Sowing and Nurturing,* 3.
[137] ibid.
[138] ibid, 4.
[139] ibid, 5.
[140] ibid, 6.
[141] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 70.

from the family (or the need to take sleepy kids with you), might mean that otherwise interested participants in fellowship are disinclined to make the trip. Hawkes notes that this is especially if the first few times you went along the study and/or fellowship themselves were not engaging.[142] You might "make an effort" to cross your street or suburb, but not necessarily your shire or district, to participate in a less-than-inspiring group.

Education is an issue for many rural communities as there are lower levels of learning attainment and school retention levels away from Adelaide.[143] Many students from rural backgrounds are required to travel to regional towns or to board to access upper secondary education, and the resulting drain of youth from the communities not only leaves them aging, it leaves them bereft of the investments made in education and skilling.[144] When young people leave life-giving resources for renewal are lost.[145] Happily, this is becoming less the case with the rise of online-based learning through programmes such as Moodle and Skype that allow students to study where they are. For generations that did not have this more recent access to learning their self-perceived poor academic attainment can lead to reticence to engage with church since church is perceived by them to be middle class and clever.[146]

There is an extent to which theology and churchmanship do not matter so much as locality in a small town, Christians attend the church in their village because it is the one that is there.[147] This must be kept in mind by denominational leaders, it is necessary to be inclusive if the church is serious about being missional.[148]

Minister Role:

Any ministry practitioner can be present in the local community only at the invitation of that community, therefore it is vital that minister's activities extend beyond Sunday and into being a supportive, nurturing, interested presence in

[142] ibid.
[143] ibid, 35.
[144] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2014), 27.
[145] ibid.
[146] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 40.
[147] Sally Gaze. *Mission-Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside,* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), 5.
[148] ibid.

the wider community. Hawkes described his time as a rural minister akin to his being the town's unofficial but idiomatically agreed social worker[149], yet in the last twenty-five years even that role has been assumed by accredited social workers, mental health and pastoral care staff from government and educational agencies. What has been retained is the prophetic role of the Church and the ways in which all people of faith in the community might name injustice and unethical practices. In rural communities special concern is held for care of the natural environment, the treatment of the poor and marginalised in society, and the relative lack of access to wealth and community resources that typify life away from the cities.[150]

Writing from her experience as minister to a rural community, Ellis observed that the key to establishing effective ministries is found in creating healthy relationships with congregations and the wider community through intentional visitation.[151] In conversation with me she expanded upon her making it a priority that she met and spoke with people she wished to come alongside as her ministry progressed with an eye to discerning who are the gatekeepers and the custodians of culture in church and town.[152] By the same token it is important that the new minister meet with the "common people" such that they know that they have someone who will take the time to listen to them and identify with their concerns as local people.

Much has been said, and could be said of the concept of the minister's living in a "fishbowl" and of the very real sense in which he or she is public face of faith in the community. Integrity is vital and the consequences of the minister being caught in trouble in the pub go beyond the minister's personal reputation.[153]

By the same token there can be a sense in some communities that "the Church" is not involved in the community unless "the Minister" is. Christians volunteering locally is the norm, and therefore is not worthy of note unless the

[149] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 2.
[150] ibid.
[151] Ellis, "Some sow", 6.
[152] ibid.
[153] ibid, 7.

clergyperson is prominent among the community.[154] This can cause problems since for most ministers operating in rural clusters a great deal of time might be spent travelling between communities and preaching places. In my local "Linked Congregations" arrangement the preaching locations at each end of our district are 90 km apart, and each is 60 km from the manse. Such is the case that the minister might not always be readily available for a specific pastoral visitation need, or a community event calling for volunteers.

An extension to the "fishbowl" idea is offered by Rob Ellis, husband of Sue, who suggested that the family of the minister must look after the manse.[155] Most people get upset when they have worked hard to create something and its custodians leave it shabby. The minister is the one who is paid to do the job of ministry, not the family, and it can be hard to deal with the expectation that the family of the ordained one are to act as deputies or assistants,[156] but since you're living in a free house provided as part of your partner's job it doesn't hurt to keep it tidy,[157] indeed it contributes to the reputation for integrity of the minister if the manse is presentable and welcoming.

Pastoral work is more important, and scholarship in the sermon less important, to rural people than to city-trained clergy.[158] Many rural people do not want programming and retraining; they want support and equipping in getting on and doing what they as the local people see as the needs to be filled. In this way many rural people prefer to be spoken with rather than written to, a visit is better than an email or a notice-sheet. Trust is built in face-to-face communication and discussion of ideas.[159] Life in community is what matters, and community involves dialogue.

As a leader in a rural settlement, especially if you have come from outside the district as the new minister, it is very easy to get embroiled in controversy. Mark Betson wrote in 2014 about the dangers of being labelled as "pro-" or

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[154] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 68.
[155] Rob Ellis, "Tips on Surviving Rural Ministry as a Partner," *Australian Leadership 7/2* (August-September 2014): 8.
[156] ibid.
[157] ibid, 9.
[158] Hughes, "Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia", 19.
[159] ibid.

"anti-" with regard to a particularly emotive local issue.[160] Betson offers in response to local issues that the questions being asked of the churches are not the right ones. The concern of the local church is always primarily for the Kingdom of God and its first response to any question is the way in which love for God and neighbour might be best expressed. It follows for Betson that while members of the church might offer an opinion there should not be a definitive pronouncement from the Church upon any situation[161] that does not directly address the Kingdom of God. The way of Jesus is to empower people to consider their situation so as to make an informed decision; Jesus did not make judgement and neither should his church.[162] The role of the church is to direct people towards the means of connecting with God so as to seek God's wisdom in the decision they will make for themselves.[163] In the meantime, the minister should try to say as little as possible when it comes to emotive matters of local politics.[164]

Lay Role:

Lay roles in ministry can include what lay people are authorized to do in the Church as well as the non-ordained acts of ministry that take place in the community beyond the gathered congregation.[165] An overemphasis on the priesthood of all believers is counterproductive to mission if the gifts of God are oversubscribed to the work inside the church: the gifts of the people are needed amongst the people of the world. It is the world that is the mission field and that is the place where the ministry of all believers must be enacted.

It is true that many people who participate in rural churches know how to enact and maintain relational forms of community: I have already established that rural people know one another intimately and are well practiced at caring for one another. There are often family connections across the district and my own experience has been of discovering that seemingly unconnected people are in fact cousins, siblings, or even parent and adult child. It is for this reason

[160] Mark Betson. "From a Rural Pulpit: Tacking Controversy" in *Rural Theology 12/2* November 2014), 130.
[161] ibid, 132.
[162] ibid.
[163] ibid.
[164] ibid, 131.
[165] Stephen Burns, "Ministry" in *An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church At The Beginning Of The 21st Century*. Edited by William W. Emilson (Mosaic Press: Melbourne, 2014), 45.

that many people in rural communities have learned about matters such as forgiveness and tolerance in ways that people from the cities never have, because they live so close to their enemies.[166] In this is an example of something that local people might understand better than their new minister freshly arrived from the city. In a related story Tenny-Brittian describes a publication sent to her by her denomination that arrived around the time a similar guide was sent to another pastor in her community. Each paper described how best to undertake ecumenical activities; but Tenny-Brittian and her friend belonged to communities that had been participating together for years.[167] In rural communities the lay people are oftentimes ahead of the city's thinking on effective community partnerships, but this is not always the case.

Pastoral care often takes place as part of what the congregation does for itself, however some people who were involved in visiting their friends and neighbours confessed to feeling untrained and unskilled for the task. It was felt by them that an ordained minister or commissioned lay pastor would bring a more skilled response to the tasks of visitation, particularly in the context of a major community crisis or outpouring of grief.[168] Several of the ministers I spoke to spoke of past involvement in major bushfire or flood tragedies in the towns where they were in placement and of the need for them to "step up" into the wider community at this time. This was welcomed by the wider community of the town but in some circumstances it left the members of the local congregation to look after themselves. This was resented by some who wanted their minister to focus on ministering to them, a situation that might be addressed by the ministers ensuring that equipping for pastoral care is provided for the people of the congregation such that an attitude of care not being provided unless it is the minister doing the caring is alleviated. Hughes describes the expression of concern that whilst the people of God in the community became confident and proficient in visiting their own people sometimes the leaders were not made aware of the pastoral need.[169] When friends visit friends sometimes the Pastor does not hear. I wonder whose

[166] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2014), 26.
[167] ibid.
[168] Hughes, "Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia", 17.
[169] Philip Hughes, "Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes: Some Australian Catholic Case-Studies" in *Rural Theology* 11/1 (May 2013): 10.

concern this was, where the pastors were feeling “left out of the loop” as it were, or whether hospitalised or otherwise housebound parishioners were left dissatisfied with the pastoral care expressed towards them because one certain leader was not amongst the company that came. Is this a failing of “the grapevine”, or is it the local care network actually working at its best? Perhaps the pastoral visitors needed mentoring in pastoral care techniques, and that that is what the dissatisfied were missing. It was not so much the person of the pastor was needed to visit but the effective pastoring that the trained person brings to the visitation was lacking in the visits of well-meaning friends. In other situations, there might be a gap between the ongoing, natural pastoral care of friends and community and the emergency care offered by the pastor. A specifically appointed and formally recognised pastoral care team, mentored in care-giving and structured such that volunteers are intentional in their following-up of ongoing pastoral care needs, might be necessary.[170]

There is vibrancy in some rural churches regardless of whether their ministers are ordained or lay, local or imported, because of the sense that the future of the church in their community depends upon them.[171] There is a sense of importance in keeping the doors open because the presence of the local church is seen as important to the provision of moral guidance and the reinforcement of community-minded values.[172] Local churches contribute to local community life as guardians of the context in which the community operates, in part because most members of rural churches are also involved with community activities and groups outside the church,[173] and in activities that the church hosts for the benefit of the community rather than just the worshippers.

Participation contributes to heightened levels of ownership and belonging to the mission and function of the local church,[174] Hughes expresses this many times in his reports. Where the people are left to organise themselves in the absence of a centrally appointed leader the future is seen to be very much in

[170] ibid, 11.
[171] Hughes, “Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia”, 18.
[172] ibid.
[173] ibid.
[174] Hughes, “Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes”, 11.

the hands of the people,[175] and this attitude might be carried on even when a new minister arrives. With the future dependent upon them the community rises to the challenge by ensuring that financial provision is sufficient (and very likely finding that monetary giving must be increased) and that all of the essential tasks of ministry (but not necessarily of the clergyman) are being performed by competent lay persons.[176]

In a case-study presented by Hughes he wrote of a Roman Catholic priest in Western Victoria who was given responsibility for an area that was once four parishes, each with its own resident priest. This priest focussed his activities in this placement primarily upon the "priest-only" roles[177] and secondarily on those other specific responsibilities that were of high personal priority to him.[178] This priest is a gifted musician so he likes to lead worship, but he was pleased to delegate to lay people those areas of authority that were of lesser importance for "the priest" to do. One such area was the bulk of the pastoral care[179] and parishioners were encouraged to make use of the social connections and relationships inherent to rural communities to look after each other, with the priest available for emergency situations.[180] In pursuit of this the priest set about identifying those lay members of the community of faith who possessed gifts and aptitudes to learn how to meet the local community's need for the Church's pastoral care.[181] In this district where different congregations met for worship at the same time, (and some of those congregations separated by more than 200 km), it was impossible for the one priest to preside at every congregation every Sunday. Lay leaders would lead worship services and deliver reflections of the scriptures, with the single priest offering the Eucharist as often as he was present.[182] This required many lay people to seek training and equipping in worship leading and sermon preparation and delivery, a practice that they reported back as being valuable

[175] ibid.
[176] ibid.
[177] ibid, 6.
[178] ibid, 7.
[179] ibid.
[180] ibid.
[181] ibid.
[182] ibid.

for them with regard to their deepening understanding of God, scripture, and faith.[183]

Social Capital:

Olney and Burton surveyed a rural community and compared responses between local people attending the parish church and local people not attending, asking questions about the work of the church in the community. It comes as no surprise that attendees of church knew more of what resources and programmes the church was providing, and that the activities best known by the local people were the newsletter and the use of the parish hall. They found that while some people do not attend a Sunday service they would attend women's or men's group in the hall during the week.[184] The overarching response was that whilst the community is less aware of the church than the church is of itself the community is aware of the church and is appreciative of what the church does for the community.[185]

Interaction between churched and non-churched people occurs most commonly through membership of other community organisations,[186] and it was discovered that churched people are proportionally over-represented in these other organisations.[187] There are strong relationships between the church and the community[188] and Olney and Burton found that the church is a net producer of bridging social capital,[189] that is to say that churched people are investing in the relationships of the town and are intentional in their participation in activities other than those of church. Across town life many people are involved in many activities, but as Olney and Burton remark in this regard "the church is punching above its weight".[190]

When asked what the local church might helpfully offer to the benefit of the community, the answers given by the churched and unchurched groups gave similar responses. The greatest overlap was in the provision of child and youth

[183] ibid.
[184] Fred Olney and Lewis M. Burton. "Parish Church and Village Community: The Interchange of Social Capital in a Rural Setting" in *Rural Theology 9/1* (May 2011), 31.
[185] ibid, 32.
[186] ibid.
[187] ibid, 33.
[188] ibid, 36.
[189] ibid, 33.
[190] ibid, 28.

events, and for open house events for adults such as coffee time or study groups. Of interest to me was the request by some in the town for an opportunity to meet the minister over coffee that Olney and Burton connect with a desire for increased pastoral care from the church.[191]

When asked in what ways the church might be improved there was very little correspondence between the answers, with many single responses.[192] The suggestions made by the unchurched people, and again many were single person responses, seemed to benefit the needs of the community with suggestions for improving the church hall and kitchen facilities and wider publicity of church events.[193]

Areas of Outreach

Hawkes titled a section of his chapter on understanding rural communities "you are welcome...if you are like us", observing that the friendliness that belies rural communities only goes so far.[194] With a generational shift of families away from the land farmhouses are becoming vacant and available for rent or purchase at relatively low prices. This has had the effect of attracting families receiving social welfare payments to life in rural areas, which has been met with distress by some members in some rural communities. Hawkes cites the response to "no-hopers" in the work of sociologist Ken Dempsey,[195] a term reported to have been used in reference to new members of my own rural community buy our local MLA in 2015.[196] Rural communities, observes Hawkes, have developed a sense of corporate resilience where the group bands together to meet and dispatch issues arising which might threaten the integrity of the community. New people arriving in town, especially welfare recipients taking advantage of low cost housing are seen as a threat,[197] as "leaners" rather than "lifters" in contemporary Australian parlance. My question goes to this attitude, which I have observed in my local community, and to how

[191] ibid, 33.
[192] ibid, 34.
[193] ibid, 36.
[194] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 7.
[195] ibid.
[196] The MLA also described such newcomers as "deadbeats".
[197] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 9.

the church can minister to this new wave of townspeople who are not of the land but are economic refugees from the suburbs.

Within the proverbial “fishbowl” if someone is not one of the “us” it is easy for that person to not be seen. After living in a town of 1800 people for two and a half years shopkeepers still ask me whether I’m a visitor to the district, Hawkes might suggest that this is because I am not a member of the local CFS or SES and have therefore not gained full acceptance.[198] On the other hand, where I am known is specifically through my voluntary service with the local football team, not because I’m a common enough face at IGA or because I work at the Uniting Church.

A congregational ministry to newcomers might be a ministry of integration and invitation to participate in church life. Sadly, since “lifters” do not like to socialise where “leaners” go, so a ministry of the church which caters to socially disadvantaged people might be avoided by the general population of the district,[199] however it may prove an effective outreach to those who need the service. Furthermore, congregations in rural areas might do well to specify ministries for itinerant workers (such as doctors, police, ministers) who come and go on shorter contracts, as well as non-industry based workers (such as those who are not farmers or miners where that is the key industry). Nurture groups for friendship and support with the intention of integrating newcomers, lonely people, and those perceived as temporary residents are a worthwhile endeavour. To believe that “we do not need to care for them because they are not staying long” is not good and the minister as a perpetual outsider has a role in addressing this idea.

An attractive local church is one of integrity, authenticity and grace.[200] It is not the case that every person who leaves a rural congregation does so because he or she leaves the town, sadly stories of hypocrisy, self-righteous judgement, and incongruence run ahead in a small town. The God who includes and soothes the broken must be evidently present and knowable in the

[198] ibid.
[199] ibid, 10.
[200] Carey Nieuwhof. *Lasting Impact: 7 Powerful Conversations That Will Help Your Church Grow.* (Cumming, GA: The ReThink Group, 2015), 93.

congregation.[201] When people come to a church looking for God they should not have trouble finding God present, welcoming and comprehensible.[202]

Gibson[203] and Ellis[204] each maintain that the local church should invest in its community and advocate for the maintenance of service provision to rural communities not least of which is the provision of the Church itself. It is vital that the doors of the local church are kept open as a sign of faith with the people and that local preaching places not be closed or amalgamated. In an example provided by Gibson a minister became the local sub-postmaster to his village after the previous incumbent retired: this kept the post office open and meant that the church had practical, agreeable contact with many local people through the course of the ordinary week.[205] To this Hughes offers a challenge that coherent vision is lacking in many rural congregations and that their view of the future is simply of more of the present. The mission of the church must be seen to be more than simply keeping open the doors and continuing with those activities which had always been done.[206]

I suggest that the example of the sub-postmaster offers an example of what each of Gibson and Hughes have suggested. Where the continuing, observable presence of the Christian Church in a community, in which its ability to maintain a local church is in danger of becoming unviable, is maintained by the ordained leader thinking outside the box of "what ministers do" to take on the tasks of the post office evidence is seen of a coherent vision of a different future. Such initiatives as this one offer a prime example of what is possible and an example to follow in other small towns.

[201] ibid, 94.
[202] ibid, 96.
[203] Gibson. *Church and Countryside,* 96.
[204] Ellis, "Some sow", 7.
[205] Gibson. *Church and Countryside,* 95.
[206] Hughes, "Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia", 17.

5. LIFE AMIDST SMALL CONGREGATIONS

Many Christian congregations in rural Australia are situated in towns and districts of declining population.[207] As with the loss of other local institutions for a town to lose its church is for it to lose part of its identity.[208]

Typical rural congregations in South Australia have less than forty adults in attendance on any given Sunday; they are small churches. Hughes observes of small congregations that there is a focus on specific care for individual members[209] and of making sure that every activity is agreed to by unanimity. This has been my experience, particularly in congregations which are not the "main congregation" in a parish, which is to say the congregations which meet in towns other than that in which the manse is situated. As Ellis observed so I have seen that small congregations tend to think of mission as inviting people from the local community to come to church and participate in their activities rather than their taking the message of Jesus out from the church and engaging with people amidst the activities of the town.[210] Hawkes agrees, noting that it is not uniquely rural but it is especially common in rural areas since these areas are typified by small congregations. It is also true of small congregations that they are often lead by one or two key families, oftentimes over several generations, which can mean that members of the congregation face very strong pressure to conform. This can have a deleterious effect on retention of newcomers, especially the unchurched.[211]

I have observed a perception amongst many small congregations that their church operates in cycles of growth and decline; Ellis, who has observed the same thinking suggests that this cyclical nature is not in fact so and that it's more of a downward spiral.[212] The idea that people, especially young people, will suddenly turn up again because they did so 15 years ago is flawed: The Church must be active in making disciples if it is to grow and to do that it must

[207] Hughes, "Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes", 3.
[208] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 15.
[209] ibid, 4.
[210] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[211] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 5.
[212] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.

engage with its local community.[213] I have seen several local congregations decline waiting for the fresh influx that did not come.

Observations of church types according to size

	Family driven	Minister driven	Team driven	Systems driven
Size	0-50	50-200	200-500	500+
Leadership	P/T Minister/Pastor	Full time Minister	Minister + small team	Minister & large staff
Glue	families	Minister	teams	values/systems
Lead Minister role*	shepherd	developer	coordinator	overseer
Council role**	ministries	micro-management	management	custodian

* some of these are expressed in organisational terms and within the general responsibility of oversight and ensuring that the Word is preached.
** some of these are expressed in organisational terms and within the general responsibility of oversight

In regard to the above diagram developed by Bailey[214] he notes that it is important that the minister in a small congregation has a charismatic personality in that he/she is gifted in engagement with the people. The personal philosophy of the leader is vital; Bailey's preference as pastor in his churches was for a collegial focus on gifts in ministry, and a focus on the dispersion of the ministry gifts are responsibilities across the people.[215]

Rural communities have limited resources so local churches need to work together to survive.[216] The competitors for any pastor's attention are not the other pastors but the other leisure pursuits of a Sunday morning: the different pastors are actually team-mates. Encouraging to me is the sense amongst many rural people that the future of ministry in their towns will be seen in one

[213] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[214] Craig Bailey, Lecture at Adelaide College of Divinity September 16 2015. "*In what ways does a biblical understanding of identity motivate a people to embrace change?"*,
[215] Craig Bailey, pers. con., June 3, 2016.
[216] Mark O. Wilson, "Big fish & small towns: the surprising benefits of ministry in out-of-the-way places" *Leadership 31* no 4 (fall 2010): 87.

interdenominational community church where the clergy might come from any denomination, perhaps on a cycle of who is called and a cycle of using different buildings each week. By the same token, since small churches do not have the numbers of people to make several kinds of worship service viable a single, generalist, multigenerational event will usually be held by each. In an ecumenically-minded community different congregations might choose a focus, such as an age group or a worship style, and the congregations might work together to support each other's unique engagement with different demographics.

When many small congregations are spending their reserves and they will soon run out of money it should be asked how effective it is to have a paid minister. Bailey offers that good leadership with regard to the style and situation of the leader as a person is vital[217] and that that which is desirable is a graciousness that is directive and catalytic.[218] Such a leader is worth the financial investment because he/she is a trainer and inspirer of others. When congregations close down or lose their ability to fund a minister it can be true that community esteem is lost and the question is asked as to whether the mission itself has failed.[219] However, a leader who has built-up the people and the networks between people before departing might leave a legacy of positivity and cooperation that survives the closure of buildings or the cessation of regular worship events. Questions of the supposed faithless of people in a small community whose church closed for lack of numbers need not arise when the people have been encouraged in faith in the face of a dwindling population from which to draw worshippers.

My experience of rural Uniting Churches is that administration and property are primarily handled by lay people. Such matters are not regularly brought to the minister, so in the absence of a minister little change is seen in the procedures of day-to-day functioning. Hughes offers the suggestion that a paid lay administrator should be appointed such that the burden of operation is shared across all members of the community of faith.[220] That is to say that

[217] Craig Bailey, pers. con., June 3, 2016.
[218] ibid.
[219] Tenny-Brittian, "The Future of Small Town Ministry" (2014) 27.
[220] Hughes, "Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes", 12.

one person takes on the tasks required and that others financially support that person's time doing so. A congregation whose management depends entirely upon volunteers requires many people to donate time, or few people to donate a lot of time, which might mean that tasks are completed by the person who has time rather than the person who has skills.[221] If a skilled volunteer can be subsided for his/her time from the financial resources of the others the best of both worlds is achievable. I have observed this in action at a small congregation in a regional centre where in the absence of a resident pastor the congregation has been managed by an administrator. His concern is for rostering lay people for preaching and pastoral care tasks, and for managing the financial and administrative duties of sending financial contributions to the Synod office in Adelaide and managing financial support of missional support via a local Op Shop and a number of specified charities. This congregation has remained stable in numbers and in influence in the town in the absence of an ordained, paid leader for longer than three years.

Gaze offers a different perspective for small communities that may not have the wherewithal to host a minister in a manse and a church property in her championing of Mission Shaped Communities with different forms of being. Such groups meet without the ritual of Sunday to fellowship together and to undertake pastoral care and hospitable tasks in the local community. In the same way Hawkes suggests that groups that meet for seasons and times that follow the agricultural calendar and clock[222] might be appropriate to primary producers or industry shift-workers; such groups might not meet during reaping or might meet for breakfast after milking or night-shift. My experience of country town life is that nothing can happen on a Saturday during football and netball season because church people are often involved as volunteers outside the congregation. In this way the capacity for ministry of a small congregation is increased, not decreased, by the people's involvement in their local community.

[221] Ibid.
[222] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 69.

6. THE WELLBEING OF RURAL MINISTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Rural ministry is uniquely demanding and rural ministers experience pressures additional to those experienced by ministers in urban and suburban placements. In this chapter I intend to describe the particular stress factors that make rural ministry uniquely stressful.

While all forms of ministry carry stress and urban ministers face stresses that their rural counterparts do not, it is suggested that the burdens carried by rural ministers are felt by those ministers to be less understood by diocesan leaders than the burdens carried by city-based clergy.[223] It's not just the added burdens of a rural parish but the lessened support of the city based pastoral care teams. In response to this Gardner[224] suggested that rural districts do ecumenism much better than suburban ones, in part because of the need. There is a local commitment to the Church felt across all (or at least most) ministries. Local support and pastoral care is fraternal. Local ministers share in each other's services. There is a certain amount of Adelaide-centricity in the support services provided by the Presbytery of South Australia.[225]

There are unique and oftentimes unspoken expectations of rural ministers not limited to greater ecumenical cooperation, attendance at local sporting events, service on volunteer boards, councils and committees, and helping the emergency services in times of crisis.[226] As the only minister in town, or at least the only minister of a particular theological tradition it is common that he or she is called upon to speaking at Anzac Day, Australia Day, Community Carols events in a faith capacity,[227] and generally being the God person or presence. It is important to the work of ministry in rural areas that the minister takes time to establish relationships with the RSL, the district council, state and federal Members of Parliament, and service providers in medical, media,

[223] Paul Rolph, and Jenny Rolph. "Perceptions of stress on those in rural ministry: listening to church leaders" in *Rural Theology 6/1* (May 2008): 56.
[224] Reverend Philip Gardner is the Executive Officer for Pastoral Relations and Mission Planning for the Uniting Church in Australia Presbytery and Synod of South Australia.
[225] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[226] Ellis, "Some sow", 6.
[227] ibid.

education, police and emergency services, fields as well as other government and NGO pastoral care agencies. This is far more involved than a suburban minister might have in the presence of nearby ministers of the same denomination.

When psychologists Paul Rolph and Jenny Rolph undertook interviews in Britain with senior denominational leaders four key themes were revealed in their understanding of how and why stress is experienced by ordained clergy working in rural parishes:

1. Ministers are feeling marginalised by the communities they serve because of unrelenting, unreasonable expectations placed upon them by the local people.[228] The minister is expected to be on-call 24/7 for pastoral needs whilst also being available as a significant person in the community for village events. Ministers report that they do not often feel affirmed or receive encouragement from their people, instead they are held to a higher standard of spirituality and behaviour because of their being ordained.[229] Alongside this was the pressure placed upon clergy overseeing several parishes and the need to 'be the vicar' in more than one location at a time. Ministers were therefore less visible in the communities in which they served and the unifying factors described by Olney and Burton[230] were undermined. This was of concern and shaped an emotional burden on local clergy.[231]

   Gardner responded with regard to the Uniting Church in South Australia that this is not as true of the regional centres as it was of congregations in smaller towns across disparate regions such as the Balaklava district or Kangaroo Island, but that yes rural ministry "is not an easy gig".[232] It is correct that primary care should include the relationships with one's own congregations and collegiality with other (especially neighbouring) ministers of the same denomination,[233] and it is hoped by Presbytery that friendships within the congregation are present. However, some

[228] Rolph and Rolph. "Perceptions of stress on those in rural ministry", 59.
[229] ibid, 60.
[230] See chapter four.
[231] Rolph and Rolph. "Perceptions of stress on those in rural ministry", 60.
[232] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[233] ibid.

relationships within the congregation are inappropriate[234] and outside the guidelines of Ministerial Ethics so this is difficult. Gardner said that the Presbytery should be sponsoring collegiality and he pointed towards the work being undertaken by the Mission Networks of the Uniting Church in South Australia in which one Mission Network has annual retreats for clergy and spouses, another hosts ministerial reading groups. Each of the networks has its ways of engaging in fellowship and mutual support of ministers and pastors.[235]

2. Ministers are finding it difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance.[236] The particular issues of rural ministry in this regard include the need for the minister to maintain an often too large and rather old house and garden on a relatively low income,[237] and the need or expectation that the parish office be situated in the minister's residence. Where the minister's office and home are in the same building a detrimental effect to work-life balance is experienced.[238]

   Gardner responded having a study at the manse should not be an issue, but having the parish office there is detrimental[239] since this might involve other people entering the minister's home to perform administrative tasks. This has much to do with the size of the congregation and of the town, and is perhaps less of an issue now than it was because of the rise in information technology. In an age where many people have their own printers, computers and photocopying capabilities the need for the manse to be the location for the hardware is less than it was.[240] At the same time ministers are now doing work they would not have previously done, such as printing song sheets or newsletters from the manse printer rather than having someone use the parish photocopier elsewhere.[241]

[234] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[235] ibid.
[236] Rolph and Rolph. "Perceptions of stress on those in rural ministry", 60.
[237] ibid.
[238] ibid.
[239] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[240] ibid.
[241] ibid.

3. Ministers are finding it difficult to accept primary responsibility for their own stress management.[242] The denominational leaders spoke of their own heavy workloads and the need for their clergy to practice self-care rather than developing a dependency upon synod or diocesan staff to look after them.[243] It was noted that theological factors played a part in this such that ministers with more liberal ideologies were more likely to seek counselling than their evangelical colleagues.[244] This raises the question as to whether ministers in rural congregations are more likely to come from the more conservative end of the theological spectrum and therefore be less likely to seek timely external support than their urban and perhaps theologically more progressive counterparts.

   Gardner responded that this has more to do with personality than with theology, although of course there is interplay. It is not true that all ministers from the liberal end are necessarily more relaxed than ministers from the conservative end, and indeed the Presbytery provides counselling staff to ministers who suit these different approaches.[245] It might be the case that a more conservative minister is more confident in his/her position on faith and self-in-Christ and is therefore more resilient than a more liberal, less certain person. So called “Progressive” forms of Christianity in Australia lean more toward social rather than theological progression.[246] In Australia someone might not be in favour of ordination of same-sex attracted ministers but they are generally accepting of such people as members of society and the congregation: this is not so much the case in Mega-Church USA.

4. Ministers are finding the unique challenges of rural ministry difficult.[247] Several leaders spoke of personal experience of rural ministry and highlighted the additional personal expenses of such in comparison to urban or suburban placements. They highlighted the need for the minister and family to make use of their car (or more than one car) due

[242] Rolph and Rolph. “Perceptions of stress on those in rural ministry”, 60.
[243] ibid, 61.
[244] ibid.
[245] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[246] ibid.
[247] Rolph and Rolph. “Perceptions of stress on those in rural ministry”, 62.

> to reduced public transport options and/or the need for the minister to cover greater distances when engaged in pastoral work and the need that congregational clusters imposes upon rural ministers to travel more often and attend more meetings than their urban colleagues. The ability to satisfactorily meet needs of the minister's spouse for employment and children for schooling or employment often requires greater effort on the part of the family in a rural settlement. Where this is too difficult and the minister is the sole or primary breadwinner for the family additional pressure is placed upon that stipend. The generally smaller size of rural congregations often meant generally smaller financial security and a greater need for clergy to be involved in fundraising tasks. The leaders also considered the specifically rural problems such as crop and stock losses, and the effects of climactic disasters like floods and fires.
>
> Gardner responded with reference toward the relative generosity of congregations. A less "flush" rural congregation might not be as willing to provide the home-office of the minister with stationery or petty cash for pastoral needs as they might be if the congregation had a separate office.[248] Again this is more pronounced in smaller congregations such as Penola or Kimba than in regional centres such as Port Augusta or Mt Gambier.[249]

There needs to be further research in this area, particularly into the needs of ministers in less than full time placement (and therefore receiving less than full time stipends) and the experience of non-ordained ministers in casual or contracted short-term temporary placements.

In the South Australian context Hawkes observes that rural pastors are not very high on the Synod pecking order[250] and that country places are oftentimes seen as punishments,[251] therefore ministers in rural placements have a lower esteem in their place in the wider Church than ministers in suburban

[248] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[249] ibid.
[250] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[251] ibid.

placements. Gardner responded that this is not the case at all,[252] and although he conceded that rural placements can be harder to fill, for a number of reasons, some ministers prefer rural placements and feel themselves ideally suited to those locations rather than suburban or inner-city placements. The Presbytery places a high priority on strategic missional areas so larger rural centres such as Port Lincoln, Port Pirie, and Mount Gambier are a specific focus of the Presbytery in ways that some suburban congregations are not.[253] In fact, the Uniting Church is moving to a new model of pastoral care that will have a specific focus of developing collegiality between and amongst its ministers.[254] The Church wants to see good ministries being established across the whole state, including in major regional centres and small towns.[255]

In all of this it must be remembered that negative attitudes towards rural ministry are by no means justified. The slower pace of life offers flexibility of options for ministry not available in the faster-paced cities, which might actually lead to a more active and more fulfilling ministry. When local events and the offices of other agencies are found within walking distance of the church informal opportunities for conversations and networking arise. Rural ministers have a better chance of being used in local radio and local newspaper than city ones, and many ministers find the regular invitation to speak at community events named above (e.g. Anzac Day) to be a great privilege. Lower crime rates and the opportunity to better know the teachers at the local school make rural towns a safer option for raising a family.[256]

[252] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14, 2016.
[253] ibid.
[254] ibid.
[255] ibid.
[256] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 15.

7. MISSIOLOGY AND DISCIPLESHIP

Religious faith in Australia has become something that is owned personally yet is established upon broader-based changes in how the individual is perceived in postmodernist theology.[257] What is useful to one's own personal journey in faith is what governs the search for spiritual and religious resources, and because of this people are taking a far greater deal of personal responsibility for their faith and beliefs than they did in previous generations. The Church in the postmodern West lives in a world that is very different to the way in which the Church is described in Acts 2:42-47. A world that is consumerist, incongruent, autocratic, cloistered and driven by inertia is bringing the Church along with it in our day.[258] The world draws the attention from "we" to "me", but the first Christians who were generous and caring were so much not like that.[259]

Yet postmodernism itself has been described as "a luxury rural people cannot afford since relativistic thinking is not an appropriate response to the reality of rural life".[260] Postmodernist ideas have reached farming but those values have not been transferred across to rural theology where Modernist ideas of God prevail.[261] Many younger generation farmers in South Australia were trained at Roseworthy Agricultural College where they were exposed to postmodern ideas for farming, resource management, and animal management, alongside the technologies of farm machinery, and climate change. Sue Ellis observes that the lack in postmodernist thinking in theology is because of the lack of opportunity for discipleship: country people are not engaging with the new theology in the ways in which they are engaging with the new farming[262] because it is not being modelled for them. In this way it appears that rural Christians need refreshing in the fast-paced life of the twenty-first century as well as intentional discipleship from their pastors and oases of refreshment just as Christians in Adelaide and the regional centres do. How then can we see

[257] Hughes, "Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes", 4.
[258] Kevin G. Ford. *Transforming Church: Bringing out the good to get to great.* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndall House, 2007) 10.
[259] ibid.
[260] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[261] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[262] ibid.

transformation of our church inside our culture so that the rural church responds to the call of Christ to make disciples amongst its neighbours?

Bill Tenny-Brittian writes that it is important to begin ministry to the neighbourhood by building a spiritual foundation upon the leaders of the local congregation. The intention is that these key people become people of integrity and passion for the Kingdom of God above all else.[263] In such a congregation the pastor becomes the chief cheerleader and coach, exhorting the people to align their activities with the congregation's mission, values and vision as the congregation's mission is aligned with God's mission.

Discipleship of active Christian leaders necessitates movement away from what Hiltz calls a 'culture of membership', concurrent with movement toward a 'culture of discipleship'.[264] Much of the time spent by ministers in placement is taken up with addressing internal needs within the congregation,[265] somewhat at the expense of outward-focussed mission. The challenge is to shift the inward focus of people such that local churches become mission-shaped rather than local missions becoming church-shaped.[266] Discipleship is best expressed as a lifestyle of being and learning[267] wherein a growing congregation is one that is always continuing to learn. In a church made up of district-focussed people the pastor might ask why are they not inviting their friends along on Sunday. Are they protective of what they see as their time and space such that they do not want newcomers changing things? The work of the Church is to make connections and to follow that up with discipleship, it must be more than a provider of social care divorced from the gospel[268] such that we invite the neighbours in for coffee but not for worship.

It is important that discipleship take place, but that this not be confused with the implementation of Christian education programs.[269] The church needs

[263] Bill Tenny-Brittian, "Rural-Urban Church Growth: Ta-MAY-To? Ta-MAH-To?" *Australian Leadership 7/2* (August-September 2014): 10.
[264] Christopher Duraisingh. "From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church," *Anglican Theological Review 92/1* (winter 2010): 9.
[265] ibid.
[266] ibid, 10.
[267] ibid, 9.
[268] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[269] Tenny-Brittian, "Rural-Urban Church Growth: Ta-MAY-To? Ta-MAH-To?", 11.

people who are engaged and engaging followers of Jesus, not serial Bible study attendees amongst the already saved. The people most like Jesus are more often found in the community being their faith-reliant selves in public than in lounge room scripture sessions.[270] This is pertinent to rural ministry in the way in which many local Christians are already deeply involved in community activities and who spend time with the unchurched by being neighbourly, useful members of the district community.

It follows from this that if we believe that effective ministries first go after the lost that we make a hospitable and engaging first impression and then follow this up rapidly with conversation.[271] In these conversations it is important to network with the unchurched in the local community,[272] and we have said elsewhere that rural communities tend to do this very well.[273] It is the community of faith that must engage with the community of the neighbourhood, not simply the pastor.

With specific regard to the rural community I live in I have seen that self-made, self-reliant pioneers of the soil are reticent to coercion, therefore, ministry leadership is best achieved by invitation and shared planning with long-term goals in view. It is also for this reason, an aversion to and suspicion for authority, that it can be difficult to find male volunteers for leadership roles in local congregations:[274] no man wants to make a tall poppy out of himself, especially if he feels intimidated by the tertiary education of the new minister. Our theology must continue to be shaped by mission-shaping ways,[275] and as such it must be inclusive of the local people beginning the journey to Christ and to establishing the Reign of God from where they are.

[270] ibid.
[271] ibid, 10.
[272] ibid, 11.
[273] See chapter 4.
[274] Hawkes. *The Country Is Different,* 80.
[275] Duraisingh. “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” 28.

8. HOW THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA UNDERSTANDS MINISTRY

Within the governance of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) it is the responsibility of the presbyteries to ensure that each congregation has access to the Word and the Sacraments,[276] which is to say its preaching and teaching, and Eucharist and baptism.

Ministry as the Mission of God:

In "The Church and its Ministry", a statement on the UCA's understanding of ordination, the Church declares its understanding that the mission of God in the world is the foundation of Christian ministry.[277] The UCA understands that ministry originates in God and is expressed through humankind's participation in the activity of the triune One.[278] The witness of scripture (e.g. Colossians 2:6-12, Romans 12:3-8, Philippians 3:20-21) attests to the many gifts given to the Church by God and the Church is exhorted to make use of every gift and every person in the employment of his or her gift.[279]

The specific work of the ordained minister includes gathering and building up the congregation, proclaiming the Word of God, presidency of the sacraments, and guiding the congregation in its discipleship and expression of pastoral care.[280] The UCA has a functional view of ordination wherein a man or woman is set aside for specific tasks in the Church,[281] rather than his or her being a significantly different type of person to the lay members of the Church. Christian identity is intrinsic to Christian service so any redefinition of the task of outworking the gospel must consider the interior work of the Spirit of Christ

[276] Andrew Dutney, pers. con., June 3, 2016.
[277] "The Church and its Ministry," in Rob Bos, and Geoff Thompson (editors). *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 478.
[278] "Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia," in Rob Bos, and Geoff Thompson (editors). *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 247.
[279] ibid.
[280] "The Church and its Ministry," in Rob Bos, and Geoff Thompson (editors). *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 479.
[281] Andrew Dutney, pers. con., June 3, 2016.

within the Christian person.[282] There is a place for culture in planning, indeed the gospel must be wisely inculturated if it is to be effective, but culture must never define what it means to do ministry, only how that ministry is expressed. In this way congregations must guard against being directed solely by the preferences of their ordained ministers. Leadership and vision-casting are good, but the call to mission is corporate and the scriptural picture of life abundant in Christ is one of life together in communion.[283] Ministry is the work of each person with respect to his or her gift in complement with the gifts and ministries of everyone else, and this includes the gifts bestowed by God upon those ordained.

The UCA does not view mission primarily as a functional term in that it describes things the local church does or puts on as activities.[284] Rather the Church is to be part of the mission of the missional God to which the Church belongs. Ministry is the response of a congregation that recognises the work of the Spirit in the world and chooses to participate alongside God, who is already active.[285]

Where the Spirit of God invites belonging to God the Church provides the incarnate arms and voices to welcome and love those being transformed into the likeness of God, including its own members. A congregation that readily interacts with its community, as rural churches tend to do, is already part of the way to realising this fresh and godly definition of mission. Mission-shaped churches start in the world, seeing where God is already active, and jump aboard. They do not start in the church and propose plans for systemic change without community input. In inviting others to join their journey with and towards God as pilgrims, the Uniting Church seeks to invite others to join it on that journey. In this way the lead minister in a rural congregation who sees the strength in rural community partnerships can encourage this means of thinking, mentoring his/her people into mentoring others, and even as he/she walks alongside his/her congregation and learns with/from them so he/she can

[282] "Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia," in Rob Bos, and Geoff Thompson (editors). *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 248.
[283] ibid, 249.
[284] Duraisingh. "From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church," 10.
[285] ibid, 11.

encourage the church to learn from the marginal-to-church community. A minister who has learned to travel with God in the places and manners in which other people travel,[286] and who learns from them and from God along the way, can point out to others where God is already at work amongst them.

With regard to all of the above Ellis[287] notes that there is a place for the authority of the ordained minister in placement to insist upon denomination-specific forms of good governance and process. She asks whether all of the leaders of the local congregation are Members or Members-in-Association of the UCA, even in small, remote congregations. Ministers of the Uniting Church should walk with God and speak of God in the ways of the UCA.

Ministry of The Word

The inaugural President of the UCA Davis McCaughey noted that whilst the UCA holds to the understanding that every member of the Church has a ministry, this does not mean that anyone in the congregation can do anything he or she wishes,[288] rather what is understood is that everybody can do something. Elsewhere McCaughey noted that lay preachers proclaim the message of Christ out of the experience of their being lay persons[289] and he suggests that in naming these people the emphasis needs to be on the word 'lay' rather than 'preacher' so that the experience of not being ordained is recognised as a strength and not an absence in their ministry of proclamation. I am an accredited lay preacher within the UCA and whilst I preached my first sermon in a UCA congregation in 1991 I was commissioned only in 2011. In the 15 non-urban congregations across South Australia in which I have preached it is almost as likely to find a preacher who is competent but not officially commissioned as it is to find someone carrying formal accreditation. Rural UCA congregations in South Australia tend to use whoever is able and available and not be too concerned about who has certificated authority from the Presbytery when selecting candidates to fill spaces on the preaching plan,

[286] ibid, 26.
[287] Sue Ellis, pers. con., April 26, 2016.
[288] J. Davis McCaughey. *Commentary On The Basis Of Union.* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), 66.
[289] ibid, 80.

particularly in multi-congregation settlements where there is a need for preachers to supplement the ordained minister.

Ministry of The Sacraments

Ordained presidency at the sacraments is normative for the Uniting Church, however it is appropriate for specific lay persons to be delegated this authority so as to meet the worshipping needs of a congregation that is without ordained leadership.[290] In this regard Bos and Thompson note a preference for celebrants to be raised from within the membership of a local congregation above the importing of an ordained stranger to facilitate the sacraments.[291] According to Reverend Professor Andrew Dutney, President of the UCA 2012-2015, sacraments are foundational to the worshipping community so to bring in a stranger to preside offers something of a challenge to the integrity of that congregation as a properly constituted expression of the Universal Church.[292]

[290] "Lay Presidency At The Sacraments," in Rob Bos, and Geoff Thompson (editors). *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 440.
[291]"Introduction to 'Lay Presidency At The Sacraments'," in Rob Bos, and Geoff Thompson (editors). *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 423.
[292] Andrew Dutney, pers. con., June 3, 2016.

9. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

According to National Church Life Survey figures from 2006 62% of Uniting Church congregations in South Australia were not in Adelaide, and 48% inside that were located in towns of less than 2000 population.[293] Philip Hughes observed in 2010 that of South Australia's 134 rural UCA congregations only ten had a single ordained minister serving a single congregation, therefore the great majority of clergy placed in rural South Australia serve more than one congregation and many do so as part of a team alongside lay leaders.

Writing in response to the paper *Together towards Life* produced by the World Council of Churches Rev Dr Roderick Hewitt observed that there remains much to be said about ministerial and missional formation of Christian leaders.[294] It is important that ministers and ministry training schools attend specifically to global ideological challenges and engage in in-depth theological reflection upon these and more localised challenges. Alongside global challenges to Christianity such as the presence of other world faiths in our communities, global economic goal-setting, and global warming and climate change we might ask what the things are that matter to South Australian Christians and therefore what should be considered within ministerial formation programmes. The processes by which the churches equip their leaders must go beyond training in morality and ethics, argues Hewitt, to include education in how Christians are to live in ways worthy of their calling (Ephesians 4:1) in the world as the world currently operates.[295]

I see connections between the observations of Hewitt and those of Hughes with regard to equipping Christians for ministry: what Hewitt says of new clergy Hughes says of lay leaders in remote areas. For both scholars the issues are of how to live as Christians, and of why life matters at all: purpose-filled life in Christ is the key to living out one's calling as a saint. Learning for all must engage with the real world of experience, or engaged praxis as Professor Steve de Gruchy offered.[296] Are our ministers being engaged with their

[293] Hughes, "Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia", 11.
[294] Roderick Hewitt. "Missional Leadership Formation: Embodiment of *Together towards Life*" in *International Review of Mission*, World Council of Churches (2014), 144.
[295] ibid, 145.
[296] Quoted by Hewitt. "Missional Leadership Formation", 146.

education in ways that prompt ownership of the faith, a deepening of their relationship with Jesus, and an equipping for the tasks of missional leadership?

In South Australia efforts have been made to ensure that candidates for ministry in the Uniting Church and who reside in rural areas of the state can receive their training toward ordination in their home location. This takes the form of distance mode education through Uniting College of Leadership and Theology (a school of the Adelaide College of Divinity), through the provision of an experienced supervisor in situ, and through obligatory leadership formation days in Adelaide for which transport and accommodation costs are provided by the Presbytery.[297] According to current teaching staff the college is actively looking for the gaps in understanding and practice of ministry and for service and mission in lay leadership, and seeking to fill those gaps. The focus of the college, of which I am currently a student, extends far beyond the simple training up of candidates for ordination, and looks to the equipping of lay leaders and lay participants in worship. Where Hawkes observed that starting ministry in a country town is a great advantage to new ministers because it trains them for being a generalist, it appears that the ethos of Uniting College reflects the same thinking, especially if a candidate for ordination are residing in his/her home congregation outside Adelaide.

Rev Philip Gardner agreed with Hawkes in that rural settings offer a broad-based ministry with strategic thinking and openness to more people and experiences,[298] and therefore a good placement for new ministers. He qualified this by adding that this must also be supported by the Presbytery.[299] My experience as an applicant for ministry suggests that there must be rural insight and input into the Candidating processes of Presbytery and that the selection weekend should include rural representation on the panel alongside gender, age, theological, and lay and ordained balances.

[297] Andrew Dutney, pers. con., June 3, 2016.
[298] Nicholas Hawkes, pers. con., April 12, 2016.
[299] Philip Gardner, pers. con., June 14th, 2016.

Regarding the utilisation of lay people the question might be asked how much training might be required (or demanded) for such people to operate well.[300] The last thing the Church wants to do is to overeducate people such that they become theologically knowledgeable but lose the ability to relate to people in pastoral settings.[301] Bailey agreed that degree-level courses are not always necessary and that Certificate courses or even non-accredited training (e.g. auditing) might suffice.

Attitudes toward clergy need to be addressed, especially the question of whether a lay pastor can ever be a "real minister"[302]? Whoever leads it is vital that he or she receives ongoing support and enabling for the work of leader, ideally through mentoring/supervision and fellowship, and through opportunities for self-reflection and edification.[303] It is true that lay leadership is the heritage of many rural fellowships in Australia.[304] In pioneering days when the people moved ahead of the church in settling areas devotions were led by devout fathers or leaders, and even when the Church did arrive it often came in the form of a circuit preachers who was not present every Sunday anyway. To raise up lay leaders in the twenty-first century is therefore a return to the history of the local church.[305] Lay people are once again carrying responsibility for their own faith development and that of their peers, and for care of their community. Such people offer pastoral support to their neighbours, are growing in their awareness and ability in discerning God's Word in the Scriptures and applying that Word in sermons and Bible studies, and developing a keener sense of ownership of their faith and the Church.[306] Lay-lead fellowships are dependant for their survival upon the confidence and competence of their lay leaders, who are themselves reliant upon the work of competent and confident mentors, trainers, and support persons.[307] Support and encouragement can come from any parishioner, but training in those skills

[300] Hughes and Kunciunas. *Sowing and Nurturing,* 22.
[301] ibid.
[302] ibid.
[303] ibid, 23.
[304] Hughes, "Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes", 9.
[305] ibid.
[306] ibid, 10.
[307] ibid.

of leadership required by the ones who choose to step up to fill roles of authority can also come from the people themselves.[308]

Lay teams work best when the lay leaders have been mentored in their responsibilities by equipped teachers who provide training and debriefing as required.[309] Therefore, a minister who offers sessions in equipping and encouraging the lay people at the end of his placement and before he moves on is vital. A team of lay people who has suddenly found itself without a minister and has not been prepared through equipping to step up will struggle.[310] With the decline in congregational finance the ability to afford to maintain a full-time stipended minister is becoming less reachable for some congregations, urban and rural. Mentoring lay people in leadership responsibility and leadership tasks is a life-giving work and must be made a priority.[311] Mentoring, according to the findings of Hughes, was essential in maintaining a community lay-leadership model going in the long term.[312] Volunteers must be allowed to come on board for seasons, and must not be allowed to burn out, but to ensure this there must be ongoing training and support for new volunteers.[313] Hughes offers a piece of advice to the pastor/mentor that lay volunteers should be enabled to contribute at a level that works for them; no lay leader should ever be expected to fill all of the roles of paid clergy, rather each volunteer leader should be helped to identify patterns of contribution that are appropriate to his/her time, training, and energy.[314]

Indeed, under lay leadership worship and preaching were generally considered to be good, although some people longed for a return to the strong spiritual leadership and motivation to spiritual practices that (they believe) only an ordained person can offer.[315] Other people however valued the strengths drawn out of the lay people who had needed to step up and they were now saying that even if an ordained person were available, or at least the resources

[308] ibid.
[309] Hughes, “Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia”, 20.
[310] ibid.
[311] ibid.
[312] Hughes, “Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes”, 11.
[313] ibid.
[314] ibid.
[315] Hughes, “Lay leadership in sparsely populated rural Australia”, 16.

to support a call, they would prefer not to do so but to maintain their lay-lead status.[316] Some people prefer lay leadership models because it brings equipping of more ministers.

[316] ibid.

10. SUITABLE STYLES OF LEADERSHIP FOR RURAL CONGREGATIONS

Christianity as it is practiced in Australia has become more diverse over the past fifty years: how a denomination should train its ministers to serve in both urban megachurches and rural congregations, where one congregation measures its membership in five figures and the other in single digits is a pertinent question to examine. This is true also of large rural congregations and small suburban ones. What I have produced above is an examination of the needs and desires of small, rural congregations as an offering to inform the practice of ministry training colleges in Australia, particularly that of the Uniting Church in South Australia. I hope that these insights will also be of use to committees selecting ministers for placement in rural congregations. Because of the specific focus of this paper some of the conclusions may also have relevance to small suburban congregations, especially those that do not have a high turnover of people.

Ministry Designations.

The Uniting Church recognises specific ordained Ministries of the Word and Ministries of Deacon, specific commissioned Ministries of Pastor, and specific appointed lay leadership roles in its operation of congregations. Each specified minister is acknowledged as a person who has been set apart by God and chosen and called out of the congregation of believers to serve the needs of the community. As I argued in chapter two it is more useful in rural areas to have suitably equipped locals engaging in pastoral ministry and leadership of worship and preaching than accredited and ordained strangers performing these tasks. This is true because of the uniquely close relationships found within rural communities and the uniquely relational character of a community that has gathered for worship. Where a centrally appointed minister is present he or she is most effective when he or she acts primarily in the mode of dialogue partner and facilitator of the congregation of local people rather than as an externally appointed, temporarily resident theologian and expert.

Awareness of Rural Culture.

In all places the minister walks with the people within the practice of 'creative distance', which is the ability to stand back and take in the whole picture before returning to the cut and thrust of pastoral work and enacting change. In this regard ministry to rural communities is most effective where the minister understands and appreciates the context of ministry activity and leadership among people with a unique and symbiotic set relationships with the land and the other people in the district. This carries across to the minister's understanding of the specific implications of shift and seasonal work upon the congregation, and an understanding of the relationships between generations, extended-families and alliances. The effective rural minister understands the implications of tragic events on the whole community, especially within the context of higher rates of death through accident and suicide that typify rural districts in Australia. I entered this research task with the above understanding, derived from my personal experience of rural ministry, and find that it was been echoed and endorsed by those with whom I conversed and by the literature I examined.

Empower Laypersons through Catalytic Activity

In chapter two I introduced Craig Bailey's argument that effective ministry leaders act as catalysts to empower lay leaders and lay people. Where a mentor might retain a long and ongoing supervision of a group or mentee the catalyst brings a sharp burst of energy for change, starting a process that continues without the catalyst. This was a new idea for me, and I now see that such a focus will encourage flexibility, adaptivity, and maturity in individuals' discipleship of Christ more than mentorship would because it leaves the responsibility to enact ongoing change in the hands of the local people. This minister is manager of the change driven by God and understands the importance of drawing out the people in their talents, skills and hobbies to meet that change: by acting in this way the minister ensures that when he or she departs to take up a placement elsewhere the ministry is not left without direction or directors. This is pertinent to rural ministry where the time between centrally appointed clergy taking up a placement might extend to several years, or the new minister might be present in a placement for less than full time.

Community Focus.

Ministers within rural communities are expected by their congregations to serve and comfort the community beyond the church and must understand the need to be actively engaged in district life beyond the congregation. My experience prior to embarking upon this research lead me to understand that, but I am more assured of it now through sharing in the experience of other ministers. I now better understand that effective ministry involves the establishment of healthy relationships and the investment of active and visible attention in the community; it is not only about 'putting in an appearance' or being 'seen to be seen' but about dynamic engagement. Where the minister is the only minister of a particular theological tradition, it is important that he or she takes the time to establish relationships with other social care providers, service clubs, and community leaders. Such relationships might lead to invitations to officiate on ANZAC Day; but they might just as well lead to invitations to speak on behalf of the town in the face of contentious legislation or programmes such as proposed fishing or mining leases, or a perceived reluctance of state and federal governments to fully address issues of rural decline or the implications of lives isolated by distance from centres of education, health, and infrastructure development. A rural minister isolated from other ministers may be the only person available to fill this role, therefore he or she must have a preparedness and a willingness to do so.

Generous Orthodoxy

As the primary preacher in the congregation the minister is a teacher who guides people toward constructing meaning through his or her teaching methods, and by instructing the people in the wisdom of the Church. The minister is expected to be a wise guide, one who is to be consulted for his or her wisdom, insight and practicability, and a producer and setter of culture through his or her role as key decision maker and facilitator of decision-making councils. It is this context I find agreement with Craig Bailey, Andrew Dutney, Sue Ellis, and Philip Gardner, and some disagreement with the Conservative Evangelical perspective of Nicholas Hawkes, that a generous orthodoxy that is faithful to the Basis of Union yet not tied so strongly to one form of Christian expression as to alienate the practitioners of other forms, is paramount. I have

discovered this to be especially important in rural areas where ‘the latest ideas’ might be accessible only through the minister’s own Continuing Professional Development. Not all new ideas are practical (or indeed new) for rural placements and the minister might be called upon to discern the educational needs for his or her community relative to what is being offered centrally by the Synod.

Self Reliance.

In all congregational ministry ministers must be practitioners and models of self-awareness and self-care. Especially true in oftentimes isolated rural placements, but not uniquely so, is the need to develop ecumenical partnerships and community support to find ways of recharging and resting when the solitude or the pace of work gets too much. A rural minister isolated from many means of external support available in the city must have a preparedness to care for him or herself in this way.

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