



A Just and  
Rural and Regional  
Australia in 2001 Peaceful  
Land

Social Justice  
2001  
Sunday Statement

# Rural *and* Regional Australia *in* 2001

## Chairman's Message

On behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, I present the Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2001.

The focus for this year's Statement is on Rural and Regional Australia, looking at the extraordinary gift rural Australia has been to the whole nation. The picture of Rural and Regional Australia commonly presented is often romantic, leading us to forget about the realities of life and how difficult it can be to deal with the environment in all its different moods.

This Statement gives us the opportunity to look at the picture from many sides and to reflect together on a way of life that, for many, is fast disappearing.

As the statement highlights, 'Catholic Social Teaching regards the problems of rural communities in the context of social justice based on human dignity rather than in the framework of mere economic activity. It focuses repeatedly on rural-urban equity, the personal worth of farmers and rural people and the requirements of stewardship of God's creation.'

As I commend this Statement to you, I implore you to work together for the dignity and respect of all, building a just society in which peace and justice reigns and hearts are filled with hope.

With every blessing



WILLIAM M MORRIS, DD  
BISHOP OF TOOWOOMBA

Acting Chairman Australian Social Justice Council

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The ACSJC is committed to building social justice networks, educating on issues, presenting Catholic social teaching, promoting a spirituality of justice, researching policy and advocating change. Contact the ACSJC at 19 Mackenzie Street North Sydney NSW 2060, Tel: 02 9956 5811 Fax: 02 9954 0056 Email: [admin@acsjc.org.au](mailto:admin@acsjc.org.au) or visit the website at [www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au](http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au)

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# A Just and Peaceful Land

*The river red gum is a beautiful tree. The thick sturdy trunk supports a number of weighty branches that give a healthy covering of foliage. As it grows older, it always contains some dead or dying branches amid the flourishing growth. The new shoots spring from unexpected places, like the break points where a branch has fallen off. The river red gum can live for a long time in water when floods engulf it, but can also survive long periods of extremely dry conditions when the rivers don't run and water is hard to find.*

*The river red gum is not a bad image for rural and regional Australia: a sturdy, solid base holding weighty branches that provide homes and nourishment to a wide variety of species. Like the river red gum, parts of rural and regional Australia are flourishing and growing strongly, while other parts are dead or dying. Rural and regional Australia is resilient—the people know the vagaries of the environment in which they live and they have developed ways of surviving the floods or the long periods of drought. They band together in times of disaster and danger and use the sap of close community ties to renew their lives and livelihoods. And, like the river red gum, rural and regional Australia consistently breaks out in new growth—sometimes from the most unexpected quarters and in quite new and spectacular ways.*

*Of course, every river red gum is unique—as are the people and communities of rural and regional Australia. Many urban Australians accept the myth that rural and regional Australia is a single entity, or that conditions are similar in all parts of the country. While 'the bush' on the whole is suffering as its people adapt to globalisation, centralisation and withdrawal of services, many regional cities are prospering, although the small towns or communities now served by them are paying the price. Many urban, and some country, Aboriginal people are living a comfortable, stable life, while others are existing in third world conditions.*

*Still, from the densely populated archdioceses of the eastern seaboard to the vast, sparsely populated Kimberley diocese in the north-west of the country, there is the same variety of problems, for the churches as well as society in general.*

*Rural and regional Australia has a remarkable diversity—social, economic, environmental, workplace, and, especially, the people. For many, it is simply the best place in the world to be. But there are issues facing rural and regional Australia that need to be addressed if we are to continue building a truly fair and just Australia, broadly based on the principles embodied in Catholic social teaching. By acknowledging the problems of 'the bush', albeit in breadth rather than depth, we may awaken the minds and hearts of city dwellers, and consider the way forward to a just and peaceful land, based on the principles of Catholic social teaching.*

## Definitions

'Rural and regional Australia' usually means the third of the population who live on farms, or in cities, towns and locations with populations under 50,000. Definitions vary and alter the numbers. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 'rural people' are the 15 per cent of Australians (2.3 million people) who live in locations of below 1000 people. For Commonwealth statisticians, 'rural' constitutes people living in non-metropolitan areas of less than 100,000 people—34 per cent of the population or 5.7 million people.

# Rural and Regional Australia in 2001



## Some indicators

It is clear from Federal and State political developments over the last five years that rural and regional people feel abandoned by the major political parties. Thirty-three of the 37 poorest federal electorates are rural. There is a widespread sense of alienation and vulnerability; it is as if these Australians have been left behind in the development of the country and are no longer recognised or respected for the contribution they make to the nation. The following brief overview shows why there is a fair amount of cynicism, mixed with relief, about Government initiatives to acknowledge their problems and to implement new programs.

Inadequate, inaccessible and diminishing health services emerged as the principal concern of participants in Bush Talks meetings and submissions, conducted during 1998-99 by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission.

Health statistics reveal that the rate of avoidable deaths is on average 40 per cent higher in the country than in the capital cities. Pneumonia and influenza rates are 94 per cent higher among non-metropolitan women; heart disease in rural areas is up to 18 per cent higher; stroke rates are up to 29 per cent higher; traffic accidents are up to 61 per cent higher; respiratory disease is up to 71 per cent higher; and genital-urinary disease is up to 86 per cent higher.

Rural health workers report increased substance abuse, low morale and depression.<sup>1</sup> Long hours of work lead to greater risk of accidents and withdrawal from community activities and involvement. With the closure of support services and the difficulty of accessing medical services, families have less access to help.

As Australia faces the reality of an ageing population and increased demand for care facilities, exasperation grows about the many funding issues among local, state and federal responsibilities relating to aged care. There is considerable disenchantment as older people are forced to move to larger towns—away from family, friends and support networks—to gain access to aged care facilities.

Rural inland towns with populations of fewer than 4000 have experienced the most significant increase in suicide. The incidence of rural youth suicide is up to 13 times the national average. Factors associated with the greater risk of rural suicide include loneliness, transport difficulties, lack of advanced education opportunities, a prevailing 'bush' culture of self-reliance, increasing rates of family breakdown, geographic isolation from social supports.<sup>2</sup> Shortages of GPs, mental health nurses, psychiatrists and psychologists in rural and remote communities undermine the development of intervention strategies for young people at risk.

The social, economic and cultural health of Aboriginal people continues to deteriorate. The near obliteration of base level employment opportunities has had a disastrous effect on indigenous incomes and social infrastructure. Competition for resources has created friction between indigenous and non-indigenous community members and heightened racial tension. The movement of the political pendulum in rural Australia to more radically conservative opinion has undermined the reconciliation processes and fuelled the tension.

Rationalisation of government services to distant city or major regional centres has further isolated whole Aboriginal communities from effective services. The social infrastructure of indigenous communities is being eroded by a sense of hopelessness, manifested in greater

# A Just and Peaceful Land

emergence of social dysfunction including abuse of substances, violence, and suicide.

Far from being cherished in public policy, children and young people throughout Australia bear the brunt of unemployment, reduced services, diminishing income support and increasingly punitive criminal justice processes.<sup>3</sup>

As the social infrastructure of rural communities is withdrawn, availability of employment declines. Unemployment, especially among the young, is well above the national average. In some rural areas the rate is 40 per cent. Restricted job opportunities, lack of new apprenticeships and traineeships and business closures all contribute to unemployment which, in turn, leads to a fall in self-respect and self-esteem.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for young people in country towns to find a safe gathering place; crisis accommodation is scarce, although youth homelessness is prevalent—a situation more obvious in the larger regional centres. Young people in rural communities who have problems with drugs or alcohol often have difficulty accessing appropriate treatment and other support services; for example, accessing detox programmes usually requires a

trip to a capital city.

Children are being withdrawn from specific education services as rural poverty bites deep. The rate of country students proceeding to tertiary education fell from 25 per cent in 1989 to 16 per cent in 1997.

Students with special needs, including those with learning disabilities, are much less likely to be catered for in rural and remote areas.

## Pursuit of economic rationalism

Rightly or wrongly, the Australian rural community perceives the loss of jobs and services as a direct result of governments' pursuit of economic policies under the broad banner of 'economic rationalism', at the expense of social human capital.<sup>4</sup> Deregulation, in the dairy industry and the airlines, for example, globalisation and international trade policies usually mean the closing down of industry and services with attendant unemployment and social problems, often for families who have efficiently worked in an area for generations.

There is a perceived lack of coherent national and state policy and understanding by governments. Decisions seem to be made in a policy vacuum. Events are often apparently just left to unfold—which increases people's sense of isolation, powerlessness, and frustration. Rural and regional people feel excluded from the decision-making process.

The Senate Select Committee on the Socio-economic Consequences of the National Competition Policy highlighted that it had impacted harshly and in a disproportionate manner on rural people,

Notwithstanding the beneficial effects of open competition for services and projects—improved efficiency,



# Rural and Regional Australia in 2001

productivity increases and higher morale, lower costs etc., there is also contrary evidence about poor administration of contracting processes, amalgamation of work to the detriment of local suppliers, contract determination on the basis of price alone, acceptance of unsustainably low or aggressive prices. Small towns and companies are particularly vulnerable from the loss of human capital and reduced economic activity.<sup>5</sup>

Rural industries such as farming, large pastoral holdings, mining and forestry have found themselves helplessly linked to globalisation and policies of economic fundamentalism, with predictable results:

- A globalised market leads to historically low commodity prices, which remain low over a long period of time;
- Debt servicing is very difficult, as the playing field is not level. The European Community and the United States, for example, support farmers and exporters through subsidisation, bonuses and incentives, which in turn undermines or even eliminates local production;
- Dumping by other countries of agricultural produce on world markets has reduced world prices and taken away traditional markets;
- Mine closures have had a devastating impact on dependent communities. The long hours and days of work and the 'fly in-fly out' situation have resulted in a huge disruption to human and family life;
- Farming families find themselves decimated by the increasing domination of giant agribusinesses. Urban areas are perceived to receive greater emphasis, benefits and infrastructure (such as roads and rail) than rural communities, and
- Withdrawal of services tells people that the service or government has lost confidence in a community, so the community loses confidence in itself.

## Religious and spiritual issues

In a community of people who feel deserted and who lack hope, the church must be seen to hear their pain, believe in their dreams and be a source and symbol of hope. This is becoming increasingly difficult as numbers lessen, there are fewer but older priests, the financial support base shrinks and the needs of the community increase.

How does the church continue to minister to families in isolated areas? The continuing decline in numbers of priests and religious raises serious questions of ministry in our church.

Can we continue to cut back on the opportunity for celebrating Eucharist and still be a Eucharistic church?

If priests are not going to be available to celebrate Mass in smaller centres, how can we ensure that Eucharist continues to be the centre of all communities, not just those in the more populated areas?

Is it just to have no Eucharist available in some centres while maintaining numerous celebrations in others? Is there not a question of just distribution of resources involved?

## The positives

Like the river red gum, the people are a resilient lot who can adapt to changing situations and circumstances and, despite the drawbacks, most people in rural and regional Australia would not willingly exchange their life for that of a city dweller. They enjoy the sense of community outside the big cities and have been empowered by communication advances such as the internet, which provides 24 hour access to services and information.

## What does Catholic social teaching say about the issues confronting rural and regional Australia?

The church has been commissioned by Jesus Christ to continue his work of proclaiming and bringing to fulfilment the Kingdom of God [Luke 4:18-21]. St Paul describes the Kingdom as 'justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' [Rom 14:17]. So, work for the kingdom is work that seeks to permeate our world with those key kingdom values: justice, peace and joy.

Living justly means living in right relationship with God, ourselves, others and creation. It means living and relating in such a way that everyone's dignity is respected and enhanced. Work for justice necessarily requires the entry into all the processes, systems and structures by which we govern our living together in this world—political, economic, social, legal, customary, religious.

Catholic social teaching outlines principles which guide the church's entry into public policy debates in its efforts to influence the way we live together in this world according to the kingdom values.

Catholic social teaching has much to contribute to the discussion of the issues facing rural and regional Australia. Key questions in the discussion are:

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# Rural *and* Regional Australia *in* 2001

- What is happening to people because of the way we structure our society? and
- What is happening in our relationship with creation by the way we live?

The issues highlighted above indicate that individuals, communities and creation are suffering because of the way the structures of our society currently operate.

The foundational principle of Catholic social teaching is the inherent dignity of every human person. From this dignity flows certain fundamental rights—to life, security, work, to a family income, to the ownership of property, to freedom of conscience, to have one's culture respected, not to be discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, wealth or social status, and to be able to participate in the making of decisions which affect one's life and the life of one's community.

The current situation of many people in rural and regional Australia means that their fundamental rights are denied or severely limited. Unemployment and underemployment deny people adequate work, and the security that work guarantees.

Much needs to be done in overcoming discrimination in all its manifestations—against people of indigenous or

migrant cultures, against single parent families, against those seen as 'different'.

Catholic social teaching recognises that humans are the stewards of the goods of the earth and have a duty to respect creation and use it for the benefit of all. Rural and regional Australians generally have great respect for creation as they develop a close spiritual affinity with the land and recognise that it is integral to their own livelihoods and the survival of their communities.

There has been a significant increase in awareness of our responsibility to creation as evidenced in the widespread adoption of Landcare programs, the continual development of sustainable farming methods, and the commitment to finding solutions to the problems of salinity, the spread of noxious weeds, and so on. This principle of stewardship of creation needs to be brought into all debates about land, water and resource management. It becomes especially pertinent in the discussion of diversification of industry in rural and regional areas. Principles of stewardship of creation and the right to employment need to be held in tension.

The promotion of the common good is fundamental to Catholic social teaching. The authorities in society are responsible to the community for making decisions that enhance the common good. In relation to rural and regional Australia, it is an important task because the good of Australia is so closely linked to the success of rural enterprises such as agriculture, forestry, fishing or mining. Although agriculture now represents a lower percentage of export earnings for Australia than in the past, the efficient production of high quality, low priced food and fibre is crucial to the well being of all Australians.

Promotion of the common good of society requires that all agencies—political, social and economic—respect the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity.

The principle of solidarity asserts that the human person is social by nature. This social dimension is part and parcel of our humanity. Any reflections on humanity must take



Social Justice Sunday 2001



# A Just and Peaceful Land

into consideration both our individual and social dimensions. In work for justice, development of individual people and development of societies depend on each other. As the Australian Catholic Welfare Commission pointed out in *Valuing Rural Communities* (May 2000),

'The commitment to the dignity of every individual advocates policy which is dedicated to the community at large, that is, policy which is truly for all of us. The principle of solidarity for the common good supports horizontal and inter-generational equity in the distribution and use of resources and opportunities through public policy initiatives and in the operation of public and private institutions. It regards as abhorrent the rampant individualism and the sole pursuit of personal gain... Policies which promote solidarity and the equitable distribution of sacrifice and reward through the market and social wage systems enhance the common good and contribute to the dignity of all members of society'.<sup>6</sup>

The principle of solidarity needs to be held in creative tension with the principle of subsidiarity, which states that, 'It is an injustice ... and a disturbance to right order to assign to the larger and higher association functions which can be provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies.'

Associations exist at different levels, ranging from that of the small group and the family, through neighbourhood associations and state organisations, right up to national governments and international institutions. Higher level agencies should not perform functions which can be better provided at lower levels.

Civil authorities have an obligation to provide adequate economic and social infrastructure and to ensure that people have access to reasonable level of infrastructure services. Economic infrastructure includes physical networks and facilities that provide electricity, gas, water, and transport and communication services. Social infrastructure includes educational and health facilities and other public buildings and places such as government offices, fire and police stations, public housing, child care facilities, libraries and parks.

ABS data indicates that economic and social infrastruc-



ture has tended to increase most rapidly in the high population growth regions. Research also indicates that factors cited most often by business in choosing locations (in descending order of priority) are telecommunications, roads, lifestyle, energy, water, education, health care, sport and recreation, domestic airport, rail transport and international airport. In reference to the issues confronting rural and regional Australia outlined in the previous section, a number of significant questions of justice emerge.

Are our political and economic leaders focusing too much on the provision of economic infrastructure to the detriment of social infrastructure? The high rate of declining services in rural and regional Australia suggests this to be true.

Does the emphasis on rationalisation, regionalisation and privatisation of services mean that governments feel less responsibility for the people of rural and regional

# Rural and Regional Australia in 2001

Australia? The essential services of the economic and social infrastructure should not be seen as businesses that need to make profits. Rather they should be seen as 'services' to the people.

Equity demands that economic and social infrastructure be fairly distributed to all. The tendency to concentrate in high population growth areas puts those in more remote and isolated areas at a significant disadvantage in terms of lifestyle, health, education, communication, and business competitiveness.

The provision of work for rural and regional Australians necessitates the encouragement of business to locate to the country. As long as there are major infrastructure deficiencies—especially in areas like telecommunications, roads, health care—business has little incentive to relocate. Provision of such infrastructure is crucial to the development of rural and regional Australia and most indicators point to it either not being provided or being provided too slowly to be adequate, for example, the new style of data cabling.

Catholic social teaching places a special emphasis on concern for the poor, the powerless, and people who are vulnerable to exploitation. Church agencies such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul and Centacare do much to alleviate the immediate physical and emotional needs of the poor. The whole church, however, must continually

participate in the political and economic debates in this country. The church has an obligation to advocate on behalf of the whole of society, not just to certain sectors. Governments have an obligation to check abuses and promote order and equity in the economic sphere, contrary to prevailing philosophies which argue for market forces as the chief determining factor in what is produced and distributed; governments of those who are most disadvantaged. Political leaders need to be constantly reminded that they must sometimes become involved directly in economic activity to ensure that justice and equity prevail.

Catholic social teaching argues that civil society should, firstly, be structured in a way that allows for dialogue among different sectors, and secondly, does not foster polarisation between different groups within society. Most analysts these days argue that there is an ever widening gap developing in Australian society between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. This issue needs to be urgently and creatively addressed.

An area of particular concern to rural and regional Australians is telecommunications. In the 21st century lack of access to efficient and equitable telecommunications and data transfer capabilities places people at a distinct economic and cultural disadvantage.

A specific structural injustice that hinders many rural families is the inclusion of the farm as an asset in determining matters such as Austudy. Because of current economic policies and the globalised market place, many farmers find it difficult to make much, if any, profit on their produce despite their efficiency. Austudy should be determined on income, not assets, so that children from farming families can have better educational opportunities.

People have a fundamental right to work. The dignity of the human person is very closely linked to the character of the person as worker. Human work cannot be treated as a mere commodity, to be bought and sold in accordance with the law of supply and demand. Technology is to be used as an instrument at the service of workers, so it must not be allowed to enslave people or deprive them of their right to work. The provision of opportunities to work is crucial to all Australians, but especially to Australians in rural areas where unemployment is so high and has such disastrous economic and social effects on individuals and whole communities.

A central principle of Catholic social teaching is that the government has a role as 'indirect employer', to inter-



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# A Just and Peaceful Land

vene in the normal processes of the market in order to promote full employment and to reduce imbalances in the distribution of wealth and social advantage between different regions.

Catholic social teaching is explicit on issues concerning agriculture, both on the supply side (how food is produced) and the demand side (how food is distributed) of the economic equation.

The key demand-side elements centre on questions of population, consumption patterns, and social and political structures that affect production and distribution. The main justice issues are those addressed by Pope Pius XII when speaking at various times to the Food and Agriculture Organisation: the malnutrition, famine and chronic hunger suffered in many parts of the world while vast amounts of resources are harvested, even destroyed, in other parts of the world.

On the supply side, Catholic social teaching has centred on four main themes:

- Equity in land ownership and the security of leases;
- The threat to rural life and rural communities posed by accelerating industrialisation of agriculture;
- The rights of farm workers; and
- The increasing degradation of the environment.

In *Mater et Magistra* (1961) Pope John XXIII presented an in-depth analysis of agricultural issues, focusing especially on the exodus of rural people from farms to cities. He attributed this exodus to the depressive

state that rural people saw for their situation, in labour productivity and levels of living. Not a lot has changed for many Australian farmers 40 years later. John XXIII posed three questions—still pertinent today—concerning this ‘grave matter’.

What is to be done to prevent so great imbalances between agriculture, industry and services in the matter of productive efficiency?

What can be done to minimise the differences between rural standards of living and that of city dwellers?

How can those engaged in agricultural pursuits be assured of having every opportunity of developing their personality through their work?

In *Populorum Progressio* (1967) Pope Paul VI addressed the issues of development and the equitable distribution of those goods which stem from increased economic activity. He concentrated on the socioeconomic context of agricultural development, recognising the massive upheavals caused by the increasing mechanisation of society. He pointed out the need to address the mass departure of young people from rural areas and argued that such indicators could no longer be overlooked. Rural communities had to be given the means to participate fully in their society.

John Paul II has continued this call. In *Laborem Exercens* (1981) he asserted that in many situations radical and urgent changes are needed to restore to agriculture, and to rural people, their just value as the basis



# Rural and Regional Australia in 2001

for a healthy economy, within the social community's development as a whole. The pope has also highlighted the need for the church at all levels to be part of the discussion on environmental issues. In his 1990 World Peace Day message, John Paul II pointed out that environmental degradation is as serious a threat to world peace as the arms race, regional conflicts and other injustices among peoples.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace continued the papal emphasis on rural issues in its 1998 document *Towards a Better Distribution of Land*. Here the Council calls for adequate social infrastructure such as schools and health services to be supported by governments. It argues that, for both the economic and social good of nations, family-owned and run farms are essential. Catholic social teaching has been consistent in its emphasis on family-run farms being the preferred organisation of agriculture. It highlights what we know to be true in Australia today—that displaced rural people can overstretch city infrastructure and large scale agribusiness does not take as much care with the land as do those individual families who own and work it.

Catholic social teaching regards the problems of rural communities in the context of social justice based on human dignity rather than in the framework of mere economic activity. It focuses repeatedly on rural-urban equity, the personal worth of farmers and rural people and the requirements of stewardship of God's creation.

## Suggestions for the way forward

- **Encouragement in local initiatives by local councils, state and federal governments.**

Equity requires what the Deputy Prime Minister identifies as, 'Not giving people in rural and regional Australia more than other Australians ... as far as possible giving them what most Australians take for granted.'

Working by the principle that those most affected by a decision should have input into it. More meaningful dialogue between the decision-makers and those directly affected is needed when formulating policies for rural and regional Australians, indeed for all Australians.

A central principle of Catholic social teaching is that the government has a role as 'indirect employer' to intervene in the normal processes of the market to

promote full employment and to reduce imbalances in the distribution of wealth and social advantage between different regions. Policies currently being pursued by the Federal government promote the free-market values of individual choice, personal responsibility, economic independence and the withdrawal of government intervention.

Decisions on the continuation of such services as transport, health, police, post office and schools in rural areas should be influenced by social considerations, not purely economic factors.

Rural and regional Australians need committed local and government support.

- **Employment**

Create employment by diversifying the nation's economic base, for, without gainful employment, secure incomes and a revitalisation of rural life, social problems will only continue to proliferate.<sup>7</sup>

Decentralise bureaucracies and industries for job creation.

- **Community Building**

Conduct detailed social analysis to determine needs of communities, why people leave and what would assist them to stay.

Determine who the poor are in our communities and develop ways to include them in local and government initiatives.

Diversify wealth—keep wealth in a community through establishment of local banks or credit unions.

Promote initiatives that protect the land, water, environment and natural resources.

Keep or build community emphasis. Draw on local community skills and combine these with effective government resources and encouragement. Genuine revival requires spirit and passion from community leaders

## The Church moves forward

Dioceses across Australia are embarking on a process of consultation and renewal. Rural and regional dioceses contain communities of varying size, in area and population, sometimes very isolated. Their aims are similar—to develop and support all their faith communities, regardless of size.

Some large dioceses are offering assistance to rural areas, for example by providing, at no cost, specialist services such as liturgical programs, adult education and retreat and spiritual formation teams.

# A Just and Peaceful Land

A common experience is that in the more isolated parts of a diocese the church develops a more relational rather than functional dimension. Where the church may be experienced more commonly through occasions such as baptisms and weddings, in isolated areas community and parish life is marked by hospitality, personalised liturgy and worship and local outreach, often in the absence of a resident parish priest.

For the rural and regional diocese of Sale in Victoria, this attitude is set out in its statement of core values, 'We have significance because we are relational. We are the creatures and God is the Creator. We see others in the diocese as a part of this relationship. God called us as a people, thus community is where God is at work.'

Several parishes in Sale have entered into partnership in recent years, with most rural parishes providing a very positive model of building community and parish life. In common with other rural dioceses, their strengths are coupled with the challenge of maintaining links with the wider church, the restricted accessibility of their parish priest and the wear and tear on parish leaders as they live out their ministry in isolated areas.

Geraldton diocese in WA, the largest in Australia, covers an area of 1,300,000 square kilometres with a small Catholic population of 26,000 (1996 census), scattered in isolated areas over vast distances. To gather people outside their own parish is very difficult, so developing satisfactory communication

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# Rural and Regional Australia in 2001

networks is a constant challenge. Diocesan efforts concentrate on formation, whether it be gospel living through small group reflections, liturgy, sacraments, spirituality, leadership training and support, or social justice awareness raising, but always in a simple, accepting and collaborative style.

The Diocese of Bathurst in NSW covers a number of provincial cities, some of them prosperous regional centres, as well as smaller towns and quite isolated rural communities. During the 1990s a Task Force of the Diocesan Pastoral Coordinating Committee, set up to investigate what people thought constituted viable and vital parish pastoral care, travelled widely throughout the diocese, consulting parish groups and regional committees and reporting regularly to the Diocesan Committee. Members of the Task Force also led retreat and formation days based on the Pastoral Ministry Leadership Formation Program, which offers people, in their daily life, the means of formation in pastoral leadership and parish ministry.

After 18 months of listening, dialogue and reflection the Task Force made a number of significant recommendations in order to promote the church in its life and mission. These included:

- Division of the diocese into three geographical regions;
- Realignment and reorganisation of some parish and Mass Centre relationships;
- An option for Pastoral Coordinators as an integral part of pastoral staffing in the diocese;
- An option be made to develop small faith communities; and
- That each of the schools, hospitals, university and jails have access to an official chaplain.

Special attention was given to the needs of people in the smaller Mass Centre communities involving:

- Ensuring that such worshipping communities remain intact rather than being swallowed up by larger surrounding parish centres;
- Renewal be made available and possible for these communities; and
- That parishes give them specific representation on parish committees.

The Diocesan Liturgy Committee is providing great assistance in resources and formation for people being trained to lead worship in the absence of a priest, while the diocese is providing various opportunities for ongoing development in pastoral leadership.



The Diocese of Port Pirie in SA, covering about one million square kilometres, shares what its Bishop calls 'the tragic devastation of rural communities'. In this diocese, particularly in the outback, there is a proud tradition of the priest always being there, even if 'there' is a long way away. Everything is a long way away in the outback.

Small communities need an opportunity to share their joys, sorrows, frustrations and deep fears. In Port Pirie the Diocesan Assemblies held each year for the past five years in the week prior to Holy Week have been helpful. People from all over the diocese come together for a couple of days to share aspects of their lives, celebrate together and close with the Chrism Mass.

This has offered a sense of solidarity in this rural diocese and 'we all go home with a new sense of purpose and confidence, knowing that we are there for each other'.

It has been significant that the Diocese now holds a Youth Assembly at the same time. This too has brought new hope.

One of the key recommendations arising from research in remote and western Queensland for the Diocese of Toowoomba (1994) was that pastoral planning be done in ecumenical collaboration with other Christian Churches. In January 1997 the heads of the Catholic, Anglican, Uniting and Lutheran churches in Toowoomba offered a framework for action, *Being a Church in Rural Queensland*, which opened the way for important dialogue in many of the smaller centres of the diocese.

There are many challenges still to be faced during the exploration of the possibility of ecumenical worship, ecumenical training for ministry and inviting communities to sign a mutual covenant between the churches outlining what they will commit themselves to do together.

An important forum has been the annual Western

# A Just and Peaceful Land

Ecumenical Muster, a gathering of clergy, pastoral personnel and interested people from the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Churches of the parishes west of Roma. The gathering seeks to address the question, 'How we can be church together—what is already working, where else can we work together and where are the new challenges?'

From January 2000 to June 2001 the Diocese of Townsville in North Queensland embarked on an exhaustive process of consultation with its rural, remote western parishes, where no one parish enjoys the full-time ministry of a priest. The issues which emerged were grouped under the headings Being Led; Churches Together; Relationships; Growing in Faith and Physical Resources.

A significant issue was that of parish leadership, with the recommendation that responsibility for parish leadership be entrusted to each Parish Council. Another issue concerned the development of stronger ecumenical links. Recommendations included exploring the possibility of establishing ecumenical parish councils, regular ecumenical worship, combining activities such as action for social justice, Bible study groups, forming Christian teams for preparing and conducting funerals, baptism and marriage, involvement in Western spirituality and so on.

The specific needs of young people were constantly raised during the consultation process.

A strong link in all the stories of the church in rural and regional Australia over the past hundred years has been the dedication and commitment of women religious from many congregations. It is often said of the bush that you have to live in a community for three generations before being considered 'a local'. But women religious are welcomed, accepted and loved because they are willing to immerse themselves in the life of the community, to live as the locals do, to share in the particular joys and tribulations that accompany life outside the big cities.

Certainly there is a crisis in the rural and regional church—in the declining numbers of worshippers, little finance, empty church buildings and presbyteries, the threat of no Sunday Mass, the exhaustion of trying to do all that the priest and religious once did. But, as Sr Mary Lowcock RSM, of the Townsville diocese, wrote in the National Pastoral Planning Network Newsletter (November 2000), 'In crisis there is also opportunity: the opportunity for decision and rebirth, an opportunity for an intelligent, honest and creative response for a future church that will be life-giving. The trail ahead will only be blazed when the church finds a new path around the spinifex and over the uncharted sand and rock.'

Life is certainly changing in the bush. But like the river red gum, the people and communities of rural and regional Australia will adapt slowly and steadily to the changing environment and conditions.

And they will not only survive, but flourish.

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# SAFETY STARTS AT HOME

Your home is the one place where you should be absolutely certain you are safe and secure. But, in 1997, over 320,000 Australian homes were broken into with the intention of burglary. It's a sad fact but true. Another very common danger is from small fires caused by household appliances.

The aftermath of a burglary or a house fire is often more than the loss of your possessions – it can also impact your peace of mind and sense of security.

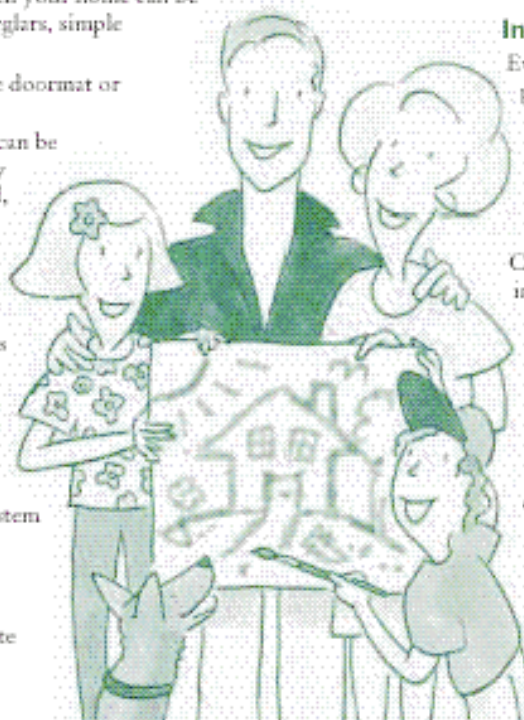
## Home Security

Taking a few simple steps to safeguard against break-ins or house fires can help to keep your home a safe haven.

Preventing a break in can often be as simple as not giving would-be burglars the motivation to enter your home and there are a number of ways by which your home can be made less attractive to potential burglars, simple deterrents such as:

- Don't hide a spare key under the doormat or a flowerpot.
- Don't put valuables where they can be seen from the window, especially items which can be easily carried, keep them in a fire-resistant safe if possible.
- Install deadlocks on all doors and windows.
- Install wire-screen security doors on your front and back doors
- Keep any tools or ladders that an intruder could use to break into your home locked away in your garage or shed.
- Consider installing a security system

You may also consider planting thorny bushes under all windows and trimming back trees or shrubs near doors and windows to eliminate hiding places.



## Fire Safety

Household appliances and heaters when used carelessly or not well maintained can be the cause of house fires. It is therefore important that appliances are switched off and unplugged when not in use.

Irons, in particular, should be used carefully, they should be left to cool on a safe place after they are unplugged. Other appliances which should be used with care are heaters and electric blankets and no more than two appliances should ever be plugged into one electrical socket.

Smoke alarms are a vital part of home safety, especially when combined with a fire blanket and extinguisher. They should be installed on the ceiling of a hall way or passage leading to the bedrooms, at least 30cm away from any walls or light fittings. And remember to check the battery regularly and replace it once a year.

## Insurance

Even though you've taken all the precautions to make your home safe and secure there is one last thing that will provide you with on-going peace of mind. That is to ensure you have a comprehensive house and contents insurance policy.

Choosing the right home and contents insurance is just as important as choosing the right home. You should check that your home policy covers your home for an appropriate 'sum insured', that is for the replacement value to re-build your home, and that your contents policy specifies anything of significant value such as your stamp collection or engagement ring.

And if you have taken precautions to protect your home and contents such as installing a security system, or you are a retiree, you should be rewarded with a discount for improving the security of your home. 🏡

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