

# Will we still be here for Christmas?

## A perspective on the emerging theme in Ministry within remote and rural Australia

1999 Mission Australia Address presented by Judith Nichols

"Will we still be here for Christmas?" This plaintive question from a young member of a BCA family reflects the uncertainty that haunts all members of the outback towns of the Diocese of North West Australia. As the holidays approach the questions arise: "Who is going back to the comfort zones?" "Who has been retrenched?" "Whose partner has had enough and is leaving with the kids?" No aspect of life is untouched by the mobility of population. No employee, least of all upper management, is immune from the inexorable process of downsizing.

Ironically there are many who would like to be mobile but cannot afford to move back to the larger population centres. While the Pilbara enjoys one of the highest average incomes in Australia, residents of the Kimberley are amongst the most disadvantaged. In fact throughout the North West, a significant number of the rural poor find themselves stranded. People on stations frequently do not have enough money to drive to town. Station communities have dwindled in size with the rural recession or because they have been swallowed up by mining companies or big business. The outback station, formerly the warp and woof of Australian (and BCA) legend is rapidly disappearing.

Many people have also come to the North West "on the rumour" of cheaper housing or contract labour. Others have fled abusive relationships. Kununurra has a significant population of single parent families in this category. of the terrain and climate.

Media reports of new projects create a false impression of expansion and population growth. In reality the Pilbara has never achieved the population predicted in the 80's. Although new ore and gas deposits have been found advances in technology almost always overtake population growth.

The instability of life in outback Australia derives from the vagaries of commodity prices. This uncertainty has a profound affect on everyone not least those who minister.

### **Here today and gone tomorrow**

An analysis of the Bureau of Census data in the period from 1991 to 1996 reveals that the Pilbara suffered a population drain of 2.8. %, the largest in the nation. The figures are somewhat rubbery because of the trend in that period to "fly in, fly out" mining operations. However this trend, for people to live in Perth but work in the Pilbara or Kimberley, militates against any sense of community. Indeed it exacerbates the plunder mentality that is so much a feature of mining

Australia. Furthermore it creates a whole new set of social problems. "Ghetto" suburbs of the families of these miners are emerging in some capitals. Although generally affluent they are characterised by lonely wives and children growing up with their fathers absent for most of the year.

Yet even a cursory reading of the history West Australia shows that this mobility is not new. From the earliest pioneering days of the Drake-Brockmans, Hamersleys and Walcotts there was continuous movement between the north and south of the state and over into the Territory for both agricultural and mining purposes. Apart from "making the quick dollar", few traditions survive and morals are mobile too since mobility does not foster accountability.

The situation is exacerbated by what is happening in the wider Australian community. Down through the ages people have experienced traumatic dislocation and the destruction of their certainties. While there is nothing new about coping with change, modern Australian society has seen the development of a culture of change, which promotes the idea that change is intrinsically good. Once the adage was, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Now big business tells us, "If it ain't broke, break it." We must confront the culture of change with the things of eternity.

The North West feeds on rumours of change. Rumours of new, value-adding projects, new ore discoveries, new government initiatives bring to town those hopeful of finding their place in the sun. As one worker said in Port Hedland, "If I haven't heard a good rumour before lunch, I make one up". Rumours foster uncertainty or vain hopes. In some areas churches have had to set up an emergency supply of food and clothing for those who have come looking for work only to find themselves stranded. Of those who have work very few intend to stay once the mortgage, world trip or kids' schooling are paid for. The exception perhaps is in places like Karratha where tourism and commercial ventures provide other means of employment. But few people want to retire here because of the inherent harshness.

This constant movement between the outback to the city or between mining centres presents immense problems for schools, health care and the general community infrastructure. Social services frequently fail. Family counselling and support are insufficient. An almost total lack of mental health resources has been blamed, in part at least, for the high incidence of young, male suicide. An article on schizophrenia in the *West Australian* (29 January, 1999) rather bleakly describes the only treatment for this illness as, "Graylands (a mental institution), gaol or suicide." Education suffers with recent graduates sent to fill gaps where experience and maturity are required. For an under-resourced church the problems are magnified.

**Can Gospel ministry take root in the lives of those who come and go?**

In the North West people are generally thankful for the ministry they receive. They are less given to the theological or liturgical dilettantism of their city counterparts. Most are grateful for the opportunity to have fellowship with other Christians and to have a permanent ministry in town. Denominational differences tend to be unimportant. It is a case of winner take all for the church that provides good Bible teaching and a loving fellowship.

Even unbelievers are often happy to have a resident minister. Sometimes the minister is seen as a kind of talisman in the community. More significantly the church represents a commitment to rural towns in the face of their abandonment by banks and other institutions that have succumbed to economic rationalism. For the mining companies the Christian ministry team proves its worth during the not infrequent industrial accidents. Moreover clergy enter whole-heartedly into the life of the community as ambulance drivers, SES volunteers and in service organizations. One BCA missionary was even named "Citizen of the Year". A Mount Magnet police sergeant made the observation that the community owed a huge debt to the unseen **counselling** ministry of one BCA family that would become evident only after they left.

However, if the clergy family of the North West want a congregation they have to go out and find one. Jan McKay runs a successful night market all at the church Newman selling second hand goods and sharing the Gospel. David O'Mara has a "Living Water" stand at the Saturday markets in Broome. He provides literal drinking water and sells Christian books. He also takes the opportunity to speak of Christ and is now well known by the so-called "feral" community in Broome.

Although people in the North West are not conventional church-attendees they are no more hardened to the Gospel than other Australians. In many cases they simply have not heard the real thing. However so deep is the materialism that most really do really believe that man can live by bread alone.

How, then, do you reach those at the extremes of the economic continuum? Paradoxically the very uncertainty and harshness of life in the North West leaves everybody vulnerable and exposed, no matter what economic cushion they may have. There is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Most mining towns are in essence transplanted suburbs surrounded by wilderness. The majority of the inhabitants are not tough, resilient bushmen but townies trying to survive in an alien environment. The problems they have fled have a habit of recurring. Even the monetary rewards evaporate in the effort to make life comfortable. Furthermore alcohol, drugs, gambling, expensive holidays and deep-sea fishing trips prove inadequate in the face of broken relationships or the company directive to leave town on the next plane. It is to people at the end of their tether that the Gospel often speaks most plainly.

### **Modelling stable family life**

Because they usually stay a minimum of six years in a community, the clergy couples in the North West become a symbol of stability and certainty amidst the transience. The population generally is very young with neither strong models of family-life nor the support of the extended family. Mobility of locale extends to mobility in relationships. Sometimes it manifests itself in a type of serialised polygamy where Dad may be paying family maintenance in Perth but has a de facto family in town. It is distressing to see single mums in the larger population centres sitting in coffee shops on pension day with their latest partner. Usually he is at best ineffectual, at worst hostile, to her children. The nurturing of families becomes an important part of Christian service. As one minister says:

*A big problem for couples in the North West is creating space for the individual if there is a serious rift. When one partner leaves it means going 2,000 km's away, not 2 ms. Working on reconciliation becomes very hard. This has happened to three church marriages in the last two years. Several people in the church, including us now supply a place to live for a while and this has rescued at least one marriage. By far the largest and most serious problem we have in the church is marriage stress and we feel we must model something of what a marriage can be.*

Advice on parenting and family life are constantly recurring opportunities for outreach and evangelism. This often occurs informally in the context of craft groups, family barbecues and community activities. However, it is through involvement in schools that the best contacts are made. While other denominations sometimes have part-time ministry, it is the resident minister, adequately supported, who has the opportunities to give solid teaching, including RI in the schools. This ensures a network of contacts with the community.

The ministry to the children in itself is incalculable. Time and time again those who come to the church refer to some Christian teaching as children that has driven them back to seek Christ. Moreover the consequence of the failing to seize the opportunity are frightening. Young people have much more in common with the values of their peer group than their parents. Their mental world is a bizarre progression of images from, television, rock music, video clips, fantasy reading and, increasingly, the occult. I sat near a 6 year old and 7 year old on a flight to Karratha. They discussed at length the merits of Michael Jackson and video clips. They sang ribald songs and were clearly growing up without any moral centre to their lives. Add to this an unsupervised access to their own PC's and the provision of every material want, and the picture becomes more alarming.

On the positive side the parishes such as Broome, Dongara and the North East Goldfields have a lively and effective ministry through kids' clubs. More than one father has turned up at church as a result of his children's questions about God.

## **The plight of indigenous Australians**

The indigenous people of the North West have traditionally been mobile. The difference is that in the past they have been culturally intact communities migrating within the fixed parameters of sacred sites secure in their culture and values. Even now they will move between towns and settlements for fishing and hunting or because of funerals or clan vendettas. A destructive form of mobility forced upon them was the clearance of the stations resulting from the wage legislation for aborigines. The role of the aboriginal stockmen and women in the opening of the sheep and cattle industry has yet to be told. Even worse was the stolen generation of children taken from their families, language, country and everything that provided their sense of identity.

Indigenous ministry has been constrained by the sad history of racism in West Australia. While black and white Christians fellowship in many congregations, indigenous pastors are sought for specialised ministry such as the community at Oombulgurri. The Rev'd Jack Braeside has a wandering brief to encourage aboriginal Christian groups in the Pilbara. Don Miller through his sheep station at Ullulla has attempted to provide ministry to indigenous people seeking respite from the dominant white culture.

Sadly there are a disproportionate number of indigenous young men in the prisons of the North West. Aboriginal parents are often blamed for failing to discipline their children. This is quite unfair as many were themselves part of the stolen generation and have been institutionalised to the extent they have no strong models of family life either white or indigenous. Furthermore a new generation of institutionalised young black males is emerging. For many, prison becomes a rite of passage. Quite apart from the vexed question of land rights and reconciliation, a more imaginative approach for dealing with young offenders is needed.

Opportunities arise through chaplaincy, teaching and visiting in Greenough, Broome and Roebourne prisons. Because those who minister in this way have contacts with aboriginal families around the North West they are welcomed by prisoners as an important link with home.

## **Pressures on the clergy family**

The stresses on Christian minister working in the North West are often subtle and debilitating. Most cope well with the heat and travel. However living expenses are high. Clergy earn a third of the average skilled workers' income. Yet it can cost half as much again to keep a clergy family in the outback as in the city. The expense bites in unexpected ways such as telephone calls to loved ones interstate, particularly in times of crisis. Clergy would like to visit the pastoral stations more frequently, which are now often operated by just one family. The man may perform tasks once carried out by a small army of workers and the wife

becomes bookkeeper, teacher and part-time jackeroo. Fuel and car maintenance expenses for visiting in this rough terrain are prohibitive.

Most people are in the North West for material gain. This sets clergy families apart. As one woman put it,

*We are the only ones in town not here to make money. That makes us very strange indeed. Sometimes our kids find it hard to understand why we don't live like other people.*

A side effect of this materialism is the culture of complaint. To keep workers happy while they are needed the mining companies provide every amenity. However this leads to a dependency mentality where nothing is right. Even the children are infected by it. The challenge is for clergy families to remain contented and thankful amidst the pervasive criticism. This dependency mentality also causes many people to assume that the mining company provides the church as it does everything else. Therefore they believe there is no need to contribute to its upkeep.

Everyone feels the isolation of distance. Wives in particular miss the immediate contact with family for major celebrations, festivals or crises. Some families cope with this by adopting "stand-in families" either as grandparents or grandchildren. Another problem is the sheer boredom of travelling long kilometres. One BCA missionary commented that he was sick of listening to taped sermons. The children of another family jacked up at the 80 kilometre drive between services on Sunday and even Colin Buchanan tapes failed to entertain after a while.

Christian families can feel morally isolated. One old hand spoke of his children coming in for physical and verbal abuse because of their family values. Later the teen-age son was told "Don't come with us tonight, X. It's not for you." X's innovative solution was to do weight training and to earn respect that way. Raising teenagers in mining towns is very difficult and the usual answer to the problem is to send the children to boarding school down south. This is a solution always accompanied by pain and sometimes resentment.

All marriages are put under strain. A missionary said he and his wife needed to get away from each other from time to time so cultivated a separate interest. He also commented that coming to the North West often means that the wife may sacrifice the opportunity to exercise her gifts as a result of moving to a small community.

### **The great frustration**

In a poll of the church family of the Diocese of North West Australia the most frequently mentioned cause of frustration is the enormous turnover of congregations. A Bible study is established and leaders trained only to fold after

a few months as the participants move on. A parish council may disappear literally over a weekend when the company fat-trimmers come to town. The minister is then tempted to take over jobs such as parish treasurer because it is easier than constantly finding and training replacements. The vision for lay training can be lost in the interests of expediency. On the other hand a clergy family may become spiritually and physically exhausted by the sheer magnitude of the task as they seek to fill all the gaps. In a city church new converts absorb much of what there is to learn about Christian living from fellowship within the congregation. Ministers in outback Australia may find themselves repeatedly having to lay the foundations of basic Christian living. This is one reason why giving is often not as generous in the North West as one would expect. People are converted and it is proper that grace should be proclaimed without reference to money. However before their wallets can be converted they often move on. Even mature Christians are frequently committed to a church elsewhere. This is especially true of tourists and "fly in, fly out" workers. They may attend a Bible study mid-week in Leinster but spend most of their Sundays at their home church in Perth.

When a congregation disappears overnight it is difficult for the minister not to feel depressed. In his head he may know it is not his fault but the empty seats confront his heart. He faces the effort of starting over yet again. In many ways this is a "service station ministry" where people may be converted and blessed but they move back to the city where another congregation reaps the benefit. The challenge is to remain gracious and persevering in the face of such discouragement.

Parents in the North West feel for their children as they lose playmates. They are concerned that their children will become loners to avoid the constant hurt of parting. For adults, too, it is easy to withdraw and not make the effort of forming new friendships. Too much emotional energy seems to be wasted. Cheryl O'Mara from Broome expresses this poignantly:

*I thought I was reasonably well prepared for the inevitability of a very mobile population...but somehow there is nothing that can dull the pain of saying good bye to people with whom you have had meaningful encounters.*

She then goes on to describe the "disappearance" of two congregation members. One had been an enthusiastic participant in Bible study and church then left "with no goodbye, no sorry to the man who'd fulfilled his order for a pair of sandals." The second had come to faith in Christ through "Christianity Explained". With his children he had become part of the fabric of the O'Maras' family life. Then, when work was no longer available, he suddenly left town. Cheryl continues "I often wonder why he never said goodbye and why I was denied the opportunity of saying goodbye to him and saying how much we enjoyed the time we had with him." These incidents reflect both the pain of parting and the strategies that

people employ in order to avoid that pain.

### **The qualities needed for ministry in the North West**

A clergyman once informed me that he could never work in the North West because it was just a maintenance ministry, providing communion for a diminishing number of Christians on stations. How wrong he was. As I looked around the congregation at the farewell service of one BCA family I counted about 30 people in church. Had all the people who had been converted or established as Christians under their ministry still been there the place would have been stacked to the rafters. In a very real sense the clergy families of the North West are engaged in a perpetual pioneering ministry. Outsiders sometimes make insensitive judgments on the basis of numbers or offertories.

So, whom do we want? The spread of the Gospel in the North West requires the right sort of people. We need a flexible ministry so that when resources are exhausted and towns close we are not tied to expensive buildings. Good rectories? Yes. Church buildings? Not so important.

Our ministers must be good Bible teachers convinced of the power of the Gospel. It is only the Word of God through the Spirit of God that will change lives and give hope. This needs to be coupled with a stable marriage and good family life. Currently a number of young clergy have volunteered for service in the North West. This is encouraging for supporters and parishioners alike. Older couples provide maturity and support for young congregations. Young couples through their children have a network for evangelism. Both have their place.

Sometimes people who have been deemed unsuitable for city ministry have their niche in the North West by virtue of their life experience. We need creative people who can think outside the pattern of a conventional city church. How can the fisherman who disappears for six weeks at a time be reached? When is the best time for a church service when Sunday morning is often the busiest time for the hospitality industry? Tourism is institutionalised mobility. It requires innovative approaches to make contact with people. Tiny Shark Bay has a quarter of a million tourists a year coming to see the dolphins. Broome with its ambience of unrestrained hedonism has a constant influx of young people looking for work and a good time. They have to be reached. How do the churches reach to grey nomads travelling around Australia? ("Don't remind me of my mortality till I've done the Gun Barrel Highway.") How can the life of the church be arranged around shift work or the mass exodus from town for holidays? What do you do when you have in the same congregation those who never vote left of the National Party side by side with those who think Stalin was a conservative?

We need flexible people who can cross cultural boundaries. (One new recruit came to realise that farmers think differently from other people!) People who

have had a previous occupation or profession have greater credibility.

### **The role of BCA and supporting churches**

All BCA personnel speak in glowing tones of the support that they receive from letters, phone calls and prayer. To know that there is a world outside that cares about them is comforting and energising. But they need support in other ways, Some simply feel worn out by the effort of trying fresh approaches or keeping their Gospel vision alive. This, of course, happens in all Christian ministry. However, it is helpful if clergy families can attend conventions and refresher courses. MU Australia generously provides for the fares of clergy family each year to attend clergy conference or synod. These are essential and refreshing times of teaching and fellowship. One visiting speaker observed that he did not detect among us the slight frostiness that usually accompanies clergy gatherings. A minister commented that he knew and cared more about his brother 1500 km's away than he ever did for the man in the next city parish in his previous diocese. We are desperate for fellowship in the North West .Our children need to see that there are other people engaged in the same peculiar work as their parents. We need the reassurance of shared vision and shared problems. Obviously BCA conferences are important in this regard, too.

Sometimes it would be helpful if a clergy family could have a year off working in a city parish. Certainly when they come to the end of their time in the Outback this would ease them into the situation of shared ministry again. Some become so used to being a one-man band that they find it hard to break the habit. We need locums to provide much-needed breaks for clergy families.

We need ministry resources, too. If city churches were willing to share such things as video resources relating to evangelism or parenting programs this could be invaluable.

People can be shared, too. The BCA sponsored visit from Moore College was a wonderful learning experience both for the mission team and the congregation. Other visiting mission teams have strengthened the Christians in isolated towns in their resolve to serve Christ. It has also led to people offering for ministry here. In a similar vein, a willingness to lead beach missions and holiday Bible clubs would benefit both us in the North West and those who come.

Finally we began with the question; "Will we still be here for Christmas". Yes, God willing and with a little help from our friends.