

SYNOD 2007 (5-9 October)

This was my first Synod and had much of interest. I'll tell of some of the things that stood out for me.

On Friday evening, 5<sup>th</sup> October, there was the opening worship service and installation of our new Moderator, Rev Niall Reid. His parents, Ron and Lorraine, were there. Despite having had major surgery for oesophagus cancer only a few months ago, Niall chaired the whole of the Synod apart from a few sessions when he was persuaded to take a rest.

Each morning we had worship and bible study. The bible studies dealt with the stories of Jesus healing people possessed by demons and related to Uniting Care work with the mentally ill and handicapped people and their carers. It was Mental Health week last week and Carers' week this week.

There were reports from each of the major operations of the church such as mission, disaster recovery, education (lead by Peter Walker), the Korean Commission, relations with other faiths, music, Uniting Care, presbyteries etc. A rabbi and an Islamic woman both spoke to Synod about interfaith relations. The Korean Commission has a number of congregations in Sydney and one in Canberra and is facing up to questions relating to second generation young people.

Ruth Powell presented information from the Church Life Survey. That showed us that while some congregations are growing, especially in the newer urban areas, many are getting smaller. A map indicated that most of the congregations west of the Dividing Range, or "sandstone curtain" as some called it, were quite small. In fact, within 10 years a huge number of congregations will be too small to afford a minister. I seem to remember that 90 people is the necessary number. This is going to force a complete change in the way we do church. Already in some rural areas it is lay people of the congregation who are running the church with occasional visits from a support minister. But more than that, in many cases church has become foreign to so many in the community that different ways of connecting with people have to be found. There were calls to ensure involving more young people in the running of the churches.

That report was compelling enough but for me and for many it was the report on rural communities struggling through the drought that was the most urgent matter.

We had had official talks about what is happening in the country and as well I gained more information by talking to rural people over coffee or lunch. Here is some of what I learnt.

The drought, as we know, has been going on for some years. Rain in June encouraged some farmers to sow crops but there has been no follow up rain and the crops are failing or very poor. The people who had borrowed money for fertilizer, seed, petrol for the tractors etc are in serious debt. Some to the extent that they can't afford the petrol to run water pumps. Some can't afford food beyond the bare necessities of life.

In the Riverina, in most areas of irrigation, no crops will be sown this year. That means no rice or wheat from there.

The small amount of water available is being kept to try to keep the fruit trees and grape vines alive. If they die it will be years, if ever, before they are in production again.

Farmers feel that they are failures. Some suicide. Some have to leave the property which may have been in the family for generations. They leave without any farewells because they cannot face their neighbours.

In the towns things are bad too. Farm mechanics have no work. Farm supply businesses are doing very little business.

Gift shops close because no one can afford to buy gifts.

More banks and other services leave town.

No one wants to move to these towns so it is very difficult or impossible to sell houses.

Both farm and town people are leaving and as more and more leave, community morale drops. People are leaving with nothing after a lifetime of working hard.

By Christmas this year, half of all pig producers will be out of business!!!

In 20 years, 93% of the population of NSW will live within 100 km of the sea. 80% of the population will be living in metropolitan areas. The far north coast of NSW will have a 26% growth in population in the next 20 years.

In response to the stories that we had been told, the Synod decided to allocate a further two ministers to inland rural work. These would be people who travel around a large part of the state offering pastoral care and other support. As well, there was a call for urban congregations to offer support in various ways. Twinning of city and country congregations with exchange visits was encouraged. Sending ministers and lay leaders to take over country churches for a month at a time so that hard pressed local lay leaders can get on with harvest or other major farm work was also recommended.

A sobering tale with some hope.