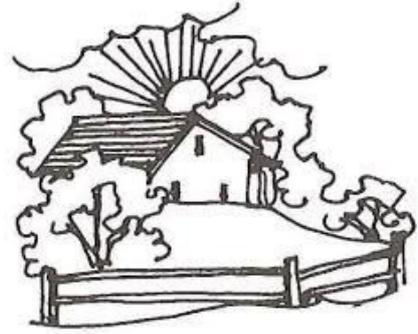


INTERNATIONAL RURAL CHURCHES ASSOCIATION
VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

STATEMENT OF 2016 IRCA-OCEANIA 9th CONFERENCE
HELD IN THE WAIRARAPA, NEW ZEALAND
16 – 20 May 2016

THEME: LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION



But those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'
John 4:14

We, the forty members of IRCA-Oceania who have been meeting for the 2016 Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Consultation, have this message to share with our Christian brothers and sisters throughout Australia, New Zealand, and the wider Oceania region, and with our rural colleagues and with the leaders of church organizations. We have travelled from Perth WA, York Peninsula SA, Flying Patrol based in Broken Hill NSW, and Outback Ministries, QL, along with New Zealanders from the Far North to the Deep South and many regions in between. We are Uniting Church, Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian. We gathered to explore the theme, "Life, Death, and Resurrection: The Future of the Rural Church for the Whole Community".

For us all, whether local or visitors, it has proven to be a connecting, uplifting, and spirit-filled experience.

In conference, we stayed in Masterton and travelled to Tinui and Castlepoint, Greytown and Martinborough, spending time in each of these communities, hearing their stories of faith and community, and sharing our experiences of life, death, and resurrection. We prayed and sang together, and we broke open the word together, reading deeper into concerns and challenges on the land and among the people. And we broke bread together.

We bring back to our churches and communities, some learnings:

1. The importance of conversations and adding rural voices to the mainstream.
 - i. Decisions are often made, in government and church, at a distance from the rural context. As a minority and often not as confident to speak, rural voices can be drowned out by mainstream urban voices or silenced by indifference and misunderstanding. In contrast some among us are undertaking authentic consultation to ensure that contextual solutions are found to contextual problems.
 - ii. More conversation is needed between different stakeholders in issues affecting rural communities or their churches. It is through conversation that relationship is built, with mutual respect, people who are at odds, become partners to work together for well-being. This is happening in work towards the healing of waterways, suicide prevention, strengthening communities, and feeding children and youth body and soul.
2. We re-affirm the value of small and scattered congregations, some less than 10 or 20 people, as the presence of Christ in vulnerable communities. We ask that the value of these faith communities be honoured and endorsed by our partner church leaderships.
3. The interface between urban and rural is an important focus for building connection and developing greater understanding. The differences between rural and urban world-views, expectations, and attitudes are myriad. We urge church leaders and urban church members to speak with rural people and listen to their stories about life in their patch.
 - i. It is as if there are different languages. In the global economic and political environment rural people are fluent in both languages, rural and urban. Our call is for urban people in the church to build fluency in "rural". The commuter and weekend escape zone around cities have produced tensions, but they in fact represent shared space in which understanding and appreciation can grow.
 - ii. Rural prayers, songs, and liturgies reflect the context of the people gathering in faith. The

Trans-Tasman family of churches has produced many resources over the years which need to be made more accessible in the wider church. We made a commitment to continue to develop relevant resources, and to make full use of the website www.irca.net.nz/oceania.php.

4. We believe that environmental standards, and ethical and personal values, need to be set higher than is currently seen as acceptable, e.g. in proposing that the measure for water quality be safe for wading. As people of faith, the bar can never be low, for it is that all things be “on earth as in heaven”. We encourage all churches and church people to model this different way based on our sure belief that the kingdom of God is at hand and ensure our actions do not contradict it.
5. A primary need in relation to rural issues is for good information, based on sound science and input from the spectrum of stakeholders.
 - i. In relation to the land, good information is vital in order to face the challenges of economics, environmental health, and climate change. Faith commitment to truth encourages critical inquiry and open disclosure, to break through scepticism about information disseminated. Also due attention needs to be given to the full range of consequences of proposals and actions.
 - ii. Much will be gained by sharing good environmental practice around our countries, with our communities, and within our churches. We also need to name the bad practice we see, offering at the same time options for making change to the good.
6. We stand tall in being rural churches and offer the wider churches these lessons from our distinctive context:
 - i. Rural churches are recognised as an integral part of their local communities, stemming from their history within the community, positive relationships between church and community people, and a reputation of being there in times of need. We encourage all churches to find their place of integrity within their community.
 - ii. Pastoral ministry within rural communities is often a ministry of befriending. This is a significant ministry in all places, befriending the leaders, those who work in government and for government agencies, people in all walks of life. We urge churches everywhere to build intentional support and mentoring of those responsible for grappling with issues that affect us all, issues that have been in the foreground of our conference: making contextual responses to the needs of children, families, and youth; mental health and the increasing rural suicides; support in seasons of rural crisis; water supply and quality; sustaining soil health and fertility.
 - iii. Story-telling is meat-and-potatoes for rural churches and rural pastoral care. Reading life through the texts of the Bible expands horizons and aspirations. Holding in confidence the personal stories of others, pastoral ministers are a treasure for communities in which families are often inter-related and privacy is difficult to maintain. Our communities have hidden stories of pain and untruths. As churches we can be agents of healing, offering space for those affected to tell their stories and be heard and believed.

IRCA-Oceania reaffirms, with the International Rural Churches Association worldwide, our solidarity with rural communities which are vulnerable due to both man-made and natural disasters. The rural areas need a voice. We realise strongly the role, given by God, to be a voice for the voiceless, and to actively raise the profile of the challenges of rural ministry.

IRCA-Oceania

20 May 2016

Leadership Group 2016-2020: Erin Pendreigh, Otago/Southland NZ; Angela Dutton, Hunter Region NSW; Steve Thomson, Wairarapa NZ; Katrina Graydon, Canterbury NZ; Rob Morgan, York Peninsula SA; John Merriman, Manawatu NZ.

IRCA ex officio: Robyn McPhail, Northland NZ; Kevin Harper, Riverina NSW, Garry Hardingham, Atherton, QLD