
Snapshots of Rural Ministries from Oceania and South Korea

Robyn McPhail

*Chaplain to the Order of St. John
Aotearoa New Zealand*

Kim Hee June

*Senior Pastor
Gowon Church
Jinan, Korea*

A Snapshot from Oceania

by Robyn McPhail

This regional network of the International Rural Churches Association (IRCA) covers the Islands of the Southwest Pacific, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand. Networking among rural churches goes back to the 1980s when rural communities in Australia and New Zealand were grappling with significant economic and social changes and rural church leaders could see value in getting together to share their experiences—stories of pain and stories of lament. Trans-Tasman (the Tasman Sea is the body of water between these two countries) Rural Ministry Consultations took place every four years from 1984 to 2016, alternating between each country.

The decision to become IRCA Oceania was made in 2012 with the goal of building connections with churches in the Pacific. Covid-19 interrupted plans for a conference in 2020, however, in May 2023, following the IRCA Conference in Dubuque, Iowa, a small gathering was held in Alexandra, New Zealand, face-to-face and by Zoom, and the IRCA-Oceania network was rejuvenated. With Zoom meetings three or four times a year and a proposal to hold a gathering in New Zealand hosted by Fijian Churches, we know that with the encouragement of others we can grow our local church life and mission to broaden our perspective and understanding of the challenges and needs of others in the wider region. We bring to you here a taste of some of the things happening in the region.

Southern Rural Chaplaincy: “Here for you in all seasons”

The Holy Spirit is moving in the rural areas in the deep south of Aotearoa New Zealand, as a new ministry of rural chaplaincy is being birthed. Southern Rural Chaplaincy is an initiative of the Anglican Diocese that covers Southland and Otago. This has become an ecumenical project that started in Southland with interest spreading into Central Otago, the goal being to cover the whole region.

We know that with the encouragement of others we can grow our local church life and mission to broaden our perspective and understanding of the challenges and needs of others in the wider region. We bring to you here a taste of some of the things happening in the region.

We are developing new ways of doing church. As Community Ministry Enabler Rev. Anne van Gend said at the IRCA event in Alexandra in May 2023, it is “both a model and a mindset.” There are several rural churches around the region, with a small group of faithful people in each. She explained:

Instead of turning up to keep their church open, we are inviting them to pray for the community; to be the eyes and the ears and let the chaplains know who would like a visit. Our small faith communities are being given a purpose beyond survival.

The Rev. Barbara Walker, a former Hospital Chaplain for nearly twelve years, is the first of these chaplains, licensed by her Bishop on the shores of Lake Wakatipu in 2022, with several people now going through the process of selection. Plans are underway to set up a Southern Rural Ecumenical Chaplaincy Trust in Southland to oversee the rural chaplains, working in partnership with the home churches of the rural chaplains, who will be encouraged to pray for them and support them with transport costs. Each rural chaplain will go through a process of selection, police checks, training, assurance of safe practice, and regular supervision.

Rural chaplains are there for rural people in all seasons.

There are plenty of opportunities for this kind of journeying as a significant number of rural people cannot get to church anymore, due to age and farm pressures, so the rural chaplains are there for them, providing pastoral support in their homes, sheds, or in the paddocks. There is a desire for someone to be there for them, to listen to their stories, and to build a relationship that can continue through whatever challenges they face on the land.

In Southland, Walker and her colleague, the Rev Richard Johnson, are building relationships, with local leaders, different denominations, sport chaplains, hospital chaplains, and rural communities across Southland. A key organization in Southland is the **Southland Rural Support Trust**. Both Johnson and Walker are strengthening ties with them so that when the trust personnel discern a need, they can contact one another. The future Rural Chaplains are here now and will continue to serve in all seasons—weather seasons and the seasons of your life.

Saltbush: Uniting the scattered community

Saltbush is a movement of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory. The Rev. Tim Jensen is a member of the team involved in this movement and writes the following about its activities, ethos, and purpose.

We seek to journey with the people who live in rural and remote areas of the region.

Our over-arching theme of “exploring life and faith together” is broad enough to give us the flexibility of discovering how this is best practiced while discerning the Spirit’s movement. Allowing us to be open to change and implementing different ways we can be in ministry alongside Christian communities—without pushing a particular theological position or orthodoxy—gives people the freedom to feel supported and encouraged. To be as accessible and present as possible we conduct weekly online cafés, have our own Facebook and Instagram pages, a Saltbush Website, gather online and in person, visit Christian communities, work alongside the Synod and Presbyteries for people in the bush and publish booklets and *Ruminations* structured as encouraging conversations about life and faith.

Three times a year we publish *Ruminations*. Each publication follows a theme and has several contributors from all walks of life. We make the publication available either as hard copy or accessed on our website. We also have a few booklets designed to encourage conversation about faith and life together. These include “Intentional Christian Communities of Practice,” “Talking About Salt,” and at a recent gathering in Coleambally (Riverina region) we launched our latest publication, “The Great Unravelling.” This small booklet is comprised of six conversations for Christian communities to explore where God is leading amid the shift in western attitudes about the church and Christianity. The presentation of the six conversations was followed by a lively discussion in which the people found it helpful to be able to explore the dilemmas facing the church without being given a

Our over-arching theme of “exploring life and faith together” is broad enough to give us the flexibility of discovering how this is best practiced while discerning the Spirit’s movement. Allowing us to be open to change and implementing different ways we can be in ministry alongside Christian communities ... gives people the freedom to feel supported and encouraged.

quick-fix program or structural overhaul. The core question is: Where do we join God? The study is based on the book, *Joining God in the Great Unravelling*, by Alan Roxburgh.

At this gathering the Rev. Geoff Wellington was inducted into the role of Saltbush Regional Minister in the Riverina. As presbyteries are getting smaller, so is the availability of members, lay and ordained, to take on the roles of responsibility for a regional administration. Regional Partnerships are a way forward where presbyteries, Synod, and Saltbush meet to fulfil the roles of governance. This has freed congregations and ministry agents to explore mission and community engagement. Wellington’s role is vital to the life of the Regional Partnership as it assists congregations in exploring their calling to God’s movement in the communities in which they find themselves.

Over the past few months, we have hosted various kinds of gatherings across New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory. On the far North Coast, we organized a lay leaders gathering. This was an opportunity for people to gather and for us to show how much our leaders are valued and appreciated. Many shared openly about the struggles they face and the weariness of the responsibilities of being leaders in congregations that do not have fulltime ministry.

In June 2023, we held a retreat at St. Clements, a Catholic retreat center outside the village of Galong. This was specifically open to ministers, deacons, and pastors. Offering to host retreats is an important way we can be more intentional about exploring life and faith together. Directions are given around a theme with brief discussion, after which people can find their own space for retreat. The hope is they leave refreshed with a renewed sense of God’s presence in their lives.

In addition to gathering in person, there are on-line cafes. We have these in four to six-week blocks with a few weeks in between. We either present a café as a Saltbush team or invite

those with a particular interest to do so. We have had a variety of guest presenters covering topics relating to the Gospel of Matthew and Being with God. The cafés are an important regular activity keeping people in touch with us and the rest of the Saltbush community.

The Saltbush team visits congregations either to be involved in worship or meeting with individuals or groups. Like our gatherings it is encouraging to be with people in person, ensuring we stay connected beyond a computer screen. To ensure Christian communities are well resourced, we continue to supply large smart televisions and technology. The televisions are helpful for worship where congregations can access sermons and music from around the world. Accessing the messages and liturgy from our website, saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au, congregations find these helpful as they participate in gatherings or meetings via Zoom.

Our website comprises news, events, publications, Word Around the Bush (the weekly message), and podcasts. We find that one of our most challenging but rewarding activities is putting together our Word Around the Bush. The challenge is finding somewhere quiet in the bush to video a message. The different bird sounds are welcome (maybe not the crow) but a distant chainsaw or semi-trailer can be disruptive. Word Around the Bush presentations are shared across the team and follow the lectionary readings, including an order of service.

One certainty about Saltbush is that it is in a constant state of change. We hope to discern the Spirit's movement to be alongside Christian communities, families, and individuals in the bush. This is most likely a desire we all share no matter where we are in the world. Our prayer is that we all discern the movement of the Spirit to find where the Living God in Christ calls us to be.

Pacific churches empowering people to speak up and speak out

Fijian Churches have been celebrating a recently elected government, something they see as an outcome of more than ten years of deep reflections and prayer. It is a coalition government which has given the people a sense of freedom. "We can say what we feel," says Wessley Manasa Vatanitawake, a member of the Methodist Church in Fiji, General Secretary of the Fiji Council of Churches from March 2020 to March 2023. It was during this time the Council organized continual prayer around all the churches, praying that God would come through them so that they can liberate the people. Vatanitawake continued: "We will be able now to share our stories without the worry that we will be taken by the police. We can share the Word of God in public places and ministers are able to preach without the possibility of being taken in for questioning."

The change in government has also brought conversations around the education of the children, with the quality of education and level achieved dropping over the last ten to fifteen years and many of their young people leaving Fiji to work in Australia and New Zealand. They are truly grateful that the government is now

Fijian Churches have been celebrating a recently elected government, something they see as an outcome of more than ten years of deep reflections and prayer. It is a coalition government which has given the people a sense of freedom.

asking what can be done to keep the young people in Fiji and, if they do have to leave, how to ensure that the youth can return for visits, since it impacts the family and the church if they become disconnected.

Currently Manasa is working as a volunteer for the Methodist Church in Fiji to develop a database for more than 500 ministers within the church who are actively serving, including those in training and on probation in anticipation of ministerial ordination. For the past three years, Manasa has been assisting the Institute of Mission and Research at Pacific Theological College in Suva to promote training programs for church ministers and leaders.

In May 2023 he was involved in a four-week training program for ministers on leadership to empower people. "We are leaders not because of our position," he says. "We are leaders because we give an enabling environment for the people to be able to share their voices. We are reminding our ministers and lay leaders from different churches that this is what leadership is, that we become leaders because of those that stand beside us, not behind us. The training introduced techniques for providing environments in which people can speak, to empower women and youth to voice their opinion, to share very honestly."

The push from the very beginning of their education, not only at the Pacific Theological College but at many of the theological colleges across the Pacific, is toward teaching, guiding, and empowering theological students to create enabling environments when sent to communities and parishes, and showing them how to provide empowering spaces for people to voice their opinions. "This includes encouragement for people in those spaces to say something, because that has not been the way. The pattern has been to come, sit in the circle, and say nothing. With these training sessions, it is starting to change—people can share their opinion respectfully," says Manasa.

Issues of concern in the Pacific

When the Pacific Church Leaders Development Meeting was held in the Marshall Islands, convened by the Pacific Conference of Churches in 2023, conversation was focused on the churches' response to the needs of their people at this time.

For the Pacific, current key concerns include:

- Climate change, with Kiribati and Tuvalu in the center of immediate effects of sea water rising. A church in the north of New Zealand has a significant mission with Kiribati people who have settled in the local community and are assisted with negotiating Kiwi ways and in particular interaction with schools and getting young people and their families settled.
- Working ecumenically on **Thursdays in Black**, **Orange the World Campaign**, and **Voices for Dignity**. Other issues include gender violence, women and young girls, young men and boys, LGBTQI+ community, and how they are responding as people in the Pacific. Violence toward women and children, and the exclusion of those who are different or are not true to the cultures of the Pacific. Church missions in the nineteenth century changed relationships and family life, with missionaries teaching a hierarchy locating men at the head and women and children subject to them. Women were no longer in the foreground of community life and decision-making but were relegated to the background—in the kitchen.
- The Movement for West Papua, praying and advocating for the churches there. Freedom Sunday is celebrated across the Pacific with Pacific Conference of Churches member churches observing the second Sunday of December as a time to collectively, ecumenically offer prayer and solidarity for West Papua and other Pacific Island countries that are still colonized to date, such as Maohi Nui (Tahiti or French Polynesia) Wallis and Futuna, Kanaki (New Caledonia), the state of Hawaii in the U.S., and the territory of Guam in the Northern Pacific.

In all of these matters, the questions the church leaders are asking include: How are we listening to the voices of the people? How are we listening to the voices of mother earth? How do we take care of the resources of our MOANA (ocean), and VANUA or FENUA (the land), because they take care of and provide for the people? There is also the question: how do people take care of each other?

Read the Bible, pray, and live out the life of Christ

When a new bishop came to the most southern Anglican Diocese in Aotearoa New Zealand, he was faced with a region that saw itself in decline, with numerous small churches scattered across Otago and Southland, many of them closing and, if they were surviving, doing so on the faithfulness of a handful of loyal people. He realized that the situation was too complex for a “plan” to fit it all, and that if they were to move forward the impetus had to come from God. Therefore, he decided to go back to basics, encouraging the whole diocese to seek to grow in prayer, reading the Bible, and living out the life of Christ.

Among the appointments made was a Community Ministry Enabler, tasked with connecting all the faithful people of God

Rather than planting generic-type missions seeded elsewhere, she would go to the places and see what was growing there. Things that might be called “weeds”—what grows naturally in the local place—can become new life for the church in a local community.

around the Diocese and nurturing their life in Christ. Enabler Anne van Gend uses the image of biodiversity to describe the approach. Rather than planting generic-type missions seeded elsewhere, she would go to the places and see what was growing there. Things that might be called “weeds”—what grows naturally in the local place—can become new life for the church in a local community.

The ideas come from the people themselves and a key consideration is not to aim too big. **“Just One Thing”** is an example of this, with ideas from the people shared by video of “just one thing” to show love in action. It is mostly people from the little centers who are involved in this. Likewise with the **Bishop’s Companion Program**, with pilgrims and their companions travelling a journey together focusing on Inner Life (Devotional Bible Study, Prayer, Living out the Life of Christ) and Communal Life (Studying the Bible, Prayer, Understanding the Body of Christ, and Understanding the Life of Christ). One of the most important resources we provide is **Gospel Conversations**. Anne van Gend has heard a few times, “I don’t start my sermon preparation until I’ve listened to the Gospel Conversations” and there are two or three churches that use them in the sermon slot monthly to give their preachers a break. Some home groups are also using them as their discussion starters.

Like Saltbush in New South Wales and ACT, Australia, this new spirit is both resourcing and connecting, as it builds on the faith of the people of God themselves. The Scattered People of the Good Shepherd includes several faith communities around the Diocese, who have been set up with a television screen, microphone, camera, and internet connection, so they can join a Zoom service on the fourth Sunday of each month. The service is interactive, beginning with sharing prayer points, and including a time for discussion in their own center before joining up again and concluding. After the first service, a group of three women in their 80s said, “It’s so nice to know there are others out there.” The bishop leads whenever available, with these services building a strong sense of family across scattered but now well-connected, communities.

A Snapshot from South Korea

by June Kim

I write as a Presbyterian preacher serving Gowon Church in Jinan Province, Korea. I would like to tell you a little bit about our rural ministry and its congregations. Probably everyone thinks the Korean church is still increasing in size. I can tell you that the rapid growth of the Korean church has finally ended, and in fact, the number of congregations is also diminishing gradually. The physical reason for this phenomenon is the overall aging population of Korea. In our region, almost all the churches have only elderly members in their congregations. Most of them are over 70 years old, which makes the preachers the youngest in the church.

Preachers have developed their own strategies to cope with this demanding situation. For worship services, we select hymns within a limited repertoire because some of the older members (usually female) only know a few hymns from memory. Preachers find it difficult to introduce and teach new songs because it takes a lot of energy and time with no promising result. Many have hearing problems too. So the preachers usually deliver a message in a very loud voice. In many cases members are also illiterate, so the preachers have to deliver a message in a simple form without using difficult terms or notions, often repeating the same simple lines.

Many older members live alone without their spouses and offspring. Preachers often pay a visit to their homes and look for something they can do, like taking them to the hospital or shopping for daily needs. Usually, the older female members do not have a driver's license due to a lack of an opportunity to learn when they were young, which was common in Korea. Preachers go around the several villages and offer them a shuttle service for every service. They do not know how to use modern technology devices like smartphones and the internet, however, all the public information from the government is uploaded only on the internet. So, the preachers gather information that is important to them, put it in the church bulletin, and also make a verbal announcement in the services for the illiterate members. In winter, it is very cold in Korea, especially in our mountainous region. Whenever it snows, it could be very dangerous for the older members to come out of their homes to attend the services. In this case, preachers give them an emergency call to tell them not to attend until it is no longer risky to come out.

Apart from this we do not have a young generation in rural areas. Only a few rural churches can operate Sunday church schools now, which tells us a lot about the imminent future of the Korean rural church. The Korean church enjoyed growth and wealth earlier but has lost the seeds it needed to grow the next generation into a tree. Now I believe it is time to bow down and pray to God for help.

The current situation also has brought about more positive effects. Rural ministers began to lead their ministry in a more self-supportive way. They compensate for the relatively low salary they

Rural ministers began to lead their ministry in a more self-supportive way. They compensate for the relatively low salary they get from the church with some side employment, like farming, community service, and some creative startups.

get from the church with some side employment, like farming, community service, and some creative startups. I, for example, run a small farm growing blueberries and asparagus. It helps to bring in additional income and gives me a better chance to enjoy rural life as a part of the greater rural community. I also know some young preachers who grow apples or cattle as part of their rural ministry. I met and talked to them at a rural ministers' union. I learned that they are happy with their choice. Many of us also choose to operate afterschool care centers which have become a crucial part of the Korean rural economy. With this public service, parents can dedicate themselves to their work or jobs without worrying about their children during the daytime. In rarer cases, some preachers venture into a startup ministry combined with normal businesses. One minister I know actually runs a diner and cafeteria in a two-story building in Jeonju City. He has a dedicated congregation who loves their preacher's ministry style.

Rural congregations live a more connected lifestyle, which gives them a chance to closely cooperate too. The female members of my church started a brunch cafeteria a few years ago. They attract visitors from all corners of Korea with their special recipe cuisine like pizza, bread, California rolls, and cold buck noodles. Now they are expanding the business with some additional services like practical courses in bread-making, wildflower tea brewing, artwork-making, etc. This business makes it a center for inter-church meetings and inspiration. A part of the profit they make flows into the church.

Rural ministry in Korea is writing a new chapter for a promised future God will give us. Ministers are walking in an unknown territory. Are they afraid? They shall not want because our Father in heaven is our Lord. I send a big Shalom to everyone in Christ Jesus!