Bush Church Aid: Reaching Australia for Christ

The coronavirus pandemic has alerted us all too quickly to the inter-connectedness and inter-dependency of all in our society. Remote and rural Australia has been in the news as we are reminded of those who provide our food and much of Australia’s income though agriculture and mining. We have also been reminded of the vulnerability of Aboriginal communities and the importance of regional tourism to the national economy.

One hundred years ago, during the Spanish flu pandemic, a group of Anglicans responded to the spiritual and material needs of remote Australians by forming the Bush Church Aid Society. Their particular concern was to reach out with Christ’s love to those who lived beyond established churches. For over a century the Society has done this by coming alongside local Christians and supporting them in evangelistic and pastoral ministry, medical work, hostels for school-age children and indigenous ministry.

Despite common perceptions, the number of those living in remote and rural Australia continues to grow. However, their distribution has markedly changed. Furthermore, remote and rural Australia is increasingly multi-cultural, with many immigrants in lonely and tough contexts. This will only be more acute with workplace closures, travel bans and vulnerable loved ones continents away. Simultaneously, the rural church has contracted and aged, while many rural regions now have expanding housing areas with little Christian witness.

Bush Church Aid currently supports about 35 different ministries in every state and the Northern Territory. This includes ministries in mining towns such as Lightning Ridge, Coober Pedy, Roxby Downs, Moranbah and in the Pilbara. It includes ministries in agricultural communities such as Kununurra, Katherine, Cloncurry, Longreach and Mudgee. It includes Aboriginal ministries in Walgett, Broken Hill, Gulargambone and Nungalinya College. It includes island ministry on Norfolk, Kangaroo and King Islands. Each of these ministries is at the invitation of local Christians and their Bishop. Most, if not all, of these ministries wouldn’t be there without BCA support. Many are the main, if not the only ministry in their area.

Ministry to children and youth is a particular challenge for those in the bush. Those in the 18-35 age bracket gravitate to the larger centres for education, jobs and social stimulation, leaving a massive leadership vacuum. BCA has worked hard to support country Dioceses with children’s and youth ministry, and with School Scripture. Similarly, sourcing and training clergy specifically suited to the varied nature of country ministry is a real challenge. BCA has also worked hard to identify and support those training for country ministry, including Indigenous students. And as new regional communities have developed, whether on the fringes of cities or in sea and tree change locations, BCA has partnered with country Dioceses in strategic church planting. Indeed, BCA has a long history of supporting innovative ministry in the country, including foundational support for Ridley College’s on-line learning and for the Diocese of Tasmania’s Digital Church Project. Both these two projects have been remarkably prescient and fruitful in our current lockdown world.

In Victoria we are blessed to have Dale Barclay leading the parish of Sunraysia South as they reach out to their Mallee community through church and community ministries. This includes the annual Bible in the Bush Conference and their Foodbank ministry, which is the only such service in town. In these tough times, they have been providing many meals and have even come perilously close to running out of food, together with their local supermarket.

Also in the Diocese of Bendigo, we support Trev Bell as he reaches out to kids and youth across the Diocese; Jacob Kelly as he trains at Ridley and works with youth in Echuca; and the church plant in the new housing area of Strathfieldsaye, which is just about to appoint a new minister, following Steve Weickhardt’s move to Port Lincoln. We are also supporting an indigenous student at Ridley, Mallacoota as they rebuild their community after bushfire, and providing resources for prayer for each of our regional municipalities.

All this costs money of course, with our Field Staff bearing many costs, especially for travel. A hearty thank you to all those who support us, both parishes and individuals. Thank you especially for your prayers, as obviously nothing bears fruit unless it is of the Lord. Can I encourage you to take some time to explore our website at www.bushchurchaid.com.au where you can sign up for regular updates, either through the mail or electronically. You can focus on a particular location, or more generally. If you’re not at home with computers, give our Office Manager, Bob Barclay, a call on 03 9457 7556 and ask to be added to our mailing list.

Please pray specifically that God would encourage and equip those in regional Australia as they reach out to their communities in Christ’s name. Please pray particularly for Indigenous Christian leaders and pastors. And please pray that God would raise up many men and women, whatever their vocation, to serve Him in country contexts, so that all Australians would be reached for Christ.

Adrian Lane

Victorian Regional Officer

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