

HOLDING ON TO HOPE: ENCOURAGING AND RESOURCING RURAL CHURCHES

1. CONFERENCE PUBLICATION

The publication of the proceedings of the 2014 Conference of the International Rural Churches Association, held in Malawi, is a separate document supplied alongside this study leave report. The statement adopted by the conference to share with churches around the world is part of that document, and is also inserted as an appendix to this report to assist with wider dissemination.

2. FOR OUR CHURCHES IN NEW ZEALAND

Two denominational churches form the foundation of the Kaeo-Kerikeri Union Parish, where I am working in ministry. I wish therefore to offer this report directly to both the Methodist Church of New Zealand and the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Findings from the International Rural Churches Association Conference in Malawi, and from reflecting on this experience in relation to rural churches in New Zealand, are important, I believe, for the strategic planning of the denominational churches and for their effectiveness in provincial areas. Furthermore, I would like this to be freely available to other denominations, through the rural network or by any other means that shares the word.

In this report I will refer simply to rural churches, but invite readers to consider small churches in urban areas as they could also relate to what is being said and proposals could apply equally there.

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A. UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES FOR CULTIVATING HEALTHY RURAL CHURCHES

A.1 Being Christ-shaped in Context

Small rural churches persist because of their sense of place in a local community. To go to a bigger church next door means disconnecting from the local community and shifting allegiance to the neighbouring one. This is a very reasonable thing to do if a local community ceases to exist (as has happened in many areas due to depopulation). The local school closes, the church closes, and the area's residents build new connections with the nearest community. But where community remains, the church is right to remain. Rural churches may engage only a portion of the community in an active way and yet they have strength simply in knowing they exist *for* the community and, in fact, the community values their existence.

A small church retains its place in this way and can remain viable as a church with a mission. It does so by living the faith that is nurtured together in worship, prayer, and study of the scriptures. In short, healthy small churches are retain their healthy viability by taking on the shape of Christ – by being Christ for others and seeing Christ in those they interact with.

This means engaging fully with the local context, its needs and issues, joys and sorrows. Mission programmes or models of church from a different context are of value only as they assist with serving in the specific locality. Care needs to be taken that examples from other churches, particularly bigger urban ones, do not provoke a sense of inadequacy, or even failure, as *church*.

A.2 Movement to the Edges

Rural churches need denominational structures to reach outwards from the centre to them, rather than rely on those on the edges to maintain focus and interest on what the centre is doing and saying. This is important for communication as well as for building and maintaining good relationships. One visit by people involved in central or regional organisation achieves more than numerous written statements can ever do. Communications or consultation documents may or may not be taken notice of.

Denominations express concern that parishes are becoming more and more congregational, with little interest in the denomination. This can be the case with Co-operative Ventures, but not exclusively so as may rural churches bring together people from a variety of denominational heritages who get involved in the church because it is their local church.

If we are going to be effective in resourcing and building up local churches, church organisations need to picture the process in terms of *distributing* outwards from the denominational source. That is, denominational leadership as a hub and definitely not as the pinnacle of a hierarchy. In agricultural terms, the image is of water being piped out to irrigate plants where they are in the paddocks.

A.3 Networking

Networking is a practical example of this distributive approach to organisation in the wider church. In contrast are the management structures that hold institutions together. For institutional thinking, duty and accountability are the drivers for parishes to connect with Synod or Presbytery, and at national level. Another way to connect people is to build networks in which the motivation to connect is not duty to the institution, but commitment to others in a similar situation to one's own, with mutual benefit from the connections. The history of the rural ministry movement in New Zealand and Australian churches through Trans-Tasman conferences, and internationally through the development of the International Rural Churches Association, is a story of networking. The power of connecting as the rural network of Christ is shown in its ability to transform struggling churches into purposeful agents of the gospel.

B. DIAGNOSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

B.1 Invisibility of small/rural churches

Economics, climate extremes, and changing demographics were important triggers when the rural ministry movement got under way in the 1980's. So also was the issue of visibility of rural churches within “the church” as a whole. References to rural churches have usually been made to speak of some problem, in particular churches struggling to get the numbers and the finances to pay the minister. The shift in urban/rural demographics has changed the balance of voices and perspectives within denominational structures, with fewer people in leadership roles with sufficient understanding of the context of rural churches.

I first encountered the International Rural Churches Association in India in 2002 attending an IRCA conference. This was their second conference and the theme was “Voice for the Voiceless”. It was immediately clear to me that this did not only apply to India and other countries where rural life is predominantly subsistence. It is our experience too. The theme has been retained as IRCA's motto: rural churches around the world continue in the gospel task of being voice for the voiceless wherever they are located.

In 2014 as denominations strategise and seek policies to proclaim the gospel more effectively, there is little indication of distinctively rural voices contributing to planning and decision-making. What would it look like for rural churches to be part of, for example “[Bringing Clarity to our Mission](#)”¹ and, by means of that, this document be effective in helping them grow in their mission? Instead it reads like it relates only to other places.

B.2 Urban/metropolitan language and perspective

A major reason for this absence of voice is the fact that the predominant language and perspective in church structures is urban/metropolitan. For an urban-based majority this is difficult to recognise, just as it is difficult for any dominant culture to know when it is its own cultural lens that it is looking through. Rural/provincial people are in effect “bilingual”, operating in the world-view of life in the outfields, with its issues and priorities, as well as interacting regularly with the centre. They are completely competent in “urban speak” so that it can seem to monolingual urbanites that there is only one language. “Rural speak” is therefore side-lined. However, distinctive rural concerns do not translate readily into an urban view of life. And, as is the case for a bi-lingual person (e.g. speaking Māori and also English), it is the side-lined language that speaks more from the heart and to the heart. Conversations confined to the dominant language miss out on a significant chunk of experience for the bi-lingual participants.

B.3 Definition of viability in terms of finances

Viability is still being defined in terms of the financial balance sheet, despite two or three decades in which rural churches have sustained an on-going presence within their local communities on a very modest cash flow. Our Trans-Tasman neighbours have developed good practice in supporting ongoing every member ministry, with local ministry teams resourced by suitably skill and trained enablers. A better definition is that a church is viable if *it has a mission in its community*, if it has a reason for being in relationship with the place where it is, and has *a group of people keen to live that mission*. That group of people need not be large to be effective in proportion to the projects undertaken.

Rural churches have sustained their life and witness in a variety of regions around New Zealand by responding to needs around them and by working with the resources at hand in church and in community. It is natural for these churches to work in partnership with other groups, including

1 <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/publications/bush-telegraph> November 2014, From the AES

other churches, being as they are fellow members of the local community. Drawing on whatever funds they can access and encouraging participation from any who find themselves drawn to the project, this is a model for cultivating healthy mission congregations. It can work in any area, rural or urban, whatever the numbers and funds. Start with viability in terms of having a mission in the local context and set your goals and expectations according to people and funds available.

C. AGGRAVATING ISSUES

C.1 Denominationalism

Most rural churches are multi-denominational. For some, this is part of their organisational structure, namely Cooperative Ventures bringing together two or more of the partners which originally sought Church Union. For others, it is their nature as *the* church in the local community, drawing in people from different denominations on the common ground of being Christian. Denominationalism is often seen as irrelevant and can sometimes be experienced as a problem.

In contrast, denominational church structures hold firmly to denominational identity, relating to congregations as member churches of the denomination, with exclusive lines of accountability and support from national or regional body to congregation. Denominations plan strategies for mission and to sustain infrastructure which member congregations are expected to relate to directly, without complicating factors. Examples of complications for multi-denominational parishes are dealing with property decisions (with property titles in the name of different denominations) and managing money held in investment by one or both of the partner churches.

Denominational branding feels either irrelevant or overwhelming in its demand to choose alignment to one to the exclusion of others. A significant number of the people present at any Presbyterian Assembly or Methodist Conference come from Cooperative Ventures, and yet reports and discussion give the appearance that there is just one denomination involved at home base. The result is often a low level of commitment at congregation level and negligible buy-in to resources and support for mission.

Denominational branding reflects a deep-seated concern for institutional survival. To the extent that, in this respect, survival drives strategy and decision-making, church leadership is not providing the best example for churches at grassroots level. By putting significant amounts of energy into maintaining the denomination, what they are doing is modelling anxiety.

C.2 Ministry as “doing”, with insufficient attention to “being”

The concern to improve performance, or simply to rescue the church, can be harmful to self-understanding of ministry. There is a strong pull towards a default setting of action to get results, and yet ministry is as much about being as it is about doing. We talk about ministry as incarnational but then urgency about church survival shifts focus too specifically onto activities and projects. We need to help one another keep in balance who we are and what we do, as disciples and together as church.

This is an issue for all in ministry wherever it is located. But where numbers are small, the fear of failing to keep the church open is a very powerful driver. Fears and expectations are acute and overload and stress continue to put ministries at risk.

For those placed in positions of responsibility within local churches by their denomination these are issues of real concern. What would assist is giving a higher profile to spiritual direction, leaders retreats, ministers resourcing days, and opportunities for study leave or long leave. For the rural and provincial context access and opportunities to get away are more difficult. Also not all entitlements for stipendary ordained ministry apply for non-stipendary ministry or volunteer leaders who carry comparable responsibilities.

Ministry as “doing” expects leadership to put attention on driving parish activities: a successful leader is one who makes things happen. It also assumes a role of problem-solver, a successful leader being one who is good at “putting out fires”. But such a role carries co-dependency risks as well as being self-perpetuating if it is always their responsibility to sort problems. The problems currently being experienced in a number of parishes currently are indicative of the inadequacy of this approach. Ministry fixated on “doing” encourages a minister to function more like a CEO than a moderator or a pastor and in this we are not walking our talk of servant mission leadership. In contrast, ministry as “being” puts attention on relationships, with God and with others, and herein lies the way to health and well-being. Relational ministry is the foundation for everything else that happens, within the life of a congregation and in its interaction with the community it serves.

C.3 Ministry models based on paid employment

This relates to the financial definition of parish viability noted in B.3 and the concern to have enough money to pay the minister. Prioritising the paid model disparages alternative options for the spiritual nurture of the congregation and for gospel outreach within a local community. Non-stipendary ministry and ministry teams come across as second-rate, that is, as what you do when you can't afford the real thing. And yet there are small churches with non-stipendary ministry that are alive and kicking and have been for some time. They clearly qualify to be called “healthy congregations” for their creative and sustaining ministries in the wider community. Below the radar of denominational churches, they quietly get on with growing disciples and being gospel people in their own context.

D. PATHWAYS FOR RENEWAL

Matters raised in the study report indicate that churches in provincial areas are beginning to question whether they in fact belong in the denominational church whose name they carry (or have listed as a partner to their Co-operative Venture agreement).

Denominational churches therefore would be advised to be very clear what they exist for. If it is maintenance of the institution for its own sake, they will eventually cease to exist. Abiding value however will be in providing an organisational structure that serves the people at the grassroots of faith and mission.

These proposals for renewal are suggestions for how denominational churches could constructively serve the hinterlands, be it rural, provincial, or any church congregations feeling out on a limb, and find as a result that they are greatly appreciated for it.

D.1 Cross-cultural interaction

At national level our churches acknowledge the significance of being fundamentally bi-cultural and also responsive to the multi-cultural context of contemporary New Zealand. Cross-cultural interaction is seen as key to ensuring that organisational structure and policy gives room for the different cultures that are present in our denominational churches. In this way different ethnic groups will feel they belong as equal partners alongside others.

i. Provincial/Metropolitan

The first step is for the rural/provincial context to be recognised as a distinctive perspective of value within the whole body of church and therefore worth learning more about. The challenge to the denominations, and especially those involved in their leadership, is to learn the language of rural communities, to stand in their shoes and keep that perspective in mind as they do the work of management and strategic planning.

Church structure needs to avoid a “one model for all” approach to relating to congregations.

Different kinds of congregations (and multi-congregation parishes) need to be in clear view in planning and decision-making and not just expressed as as footnote or as an exception to the rule that might be made to work somehow.

Key questions to ask when communicating from the church centre to rural and provincial churches would be:

What does this proposal look like from the outfields?

How will it come across when read by church councils in small churches?

Will it help them grow in their faith and mission?

Flexibility to provide what works for different contexts means being an organisation modelled on Jesus' approach to leadership, responsive to each in his or her uniqueness.

ii. Cross-denominational

Many rural churches are Co-operative Ventures with structural commitments to more than one denomination. If each of the denominations were flexible in their own structure and related to these churches always with the other denomination(s) in mind, then a significant shift in attitude and interest would take place. At present the local church feels bombarded with input from the denominations, each operating in their own sphere and, on the other side, denominational churches deplore the lack of interest shown in their church by CV churches. A greater cross-denominational understanding at the level of denominational leadership, and at parish level, would assist greatly. It is not just of academic interest how each denomination operates, but rather it is a route to mutual respect and greater co-operation.

As with other cross-cultural interaction, the use of a variety of language can help increase the likelihood of effective communication. Taking care in the wording of denominational documents and expressing proposals in different ways to connect with the different context of recipients could have quite an impact. It would give a clear message to multi-denominational parishes that they are part of the picture. At present the impression is that they will only be part of it if somehow they find a way to squeeze themselves in, or if they choose to go mono-denominational in parish policy.

Similar key questions when communicating from a particular denominational church centre to a multi-denominational parish would be:

What does this proposal look like for those who also relate to other denominational churches?

How will it come across when read by church councils in Co-operating Ventures?

Will it help them grow in their faith and mission?

As a positive side effect, this approach would also lead to strong and positive relationships between denomination and congregations.

D.2 Local education

This is a plea to denominational churches not to marginalise education for local leadership but rather to make it more available in provincial areas. Rural churches also request that good programmes already in existence be enabled to continue. If a programme enhances the ministry of those at the edges it is worth providing.² The numbers game for education continues to exclude the minority represented by rural areas.

Conversations at the rural conference in Malawi sharpened some of the issues that go with lay

2 Please, Methodist Church, find a way to continue the “Ten Minutes on a Tuesday” worship resources.

education. In a country where transport issues are a hundred times greater even than Northland, creative thinking is needed if pastors and local church leaders are to receive the on-going education they need to serve healthy churches. A catch phrase at the conference was “training without travelling”. Education needs to be moved out to the edges, to be more accessible to people whose commitments to farm and community mean it is difficult to leave home to be trained. Distance education has made significant in-roads in the challenge of educating local leaders in New Zealand, although the most affordable and broadly-based option has had to close because lack of support from its stakeholder denominations.³ Distance education, however, means distance from tutors and colleagues and it would be more successful if local support could be provided, whether mentoring or simply encouragement from others on the education journey.

The key is to enable people to learn starting from where they are. There are anxieties to overcome, particularly related to failure and workload. But the benefits of such education are considerable, personally and for the local church and community.

One specific area for encouragement is worship leadership. Some denominations have a stronger focus than others on lay preaching and their experience and insights are worth sharing. The New Zealand Lay Preachers Association is working to develop its ecumenical character as well as internet capacity, in response to input from people on the ground in small churches. These churches find it helpful to have access to accreditation for lay worship leaders, as a qualification that is true to different denominational traditions and can be recognised cross-denominationally.

In many provincial areas local ministry teams are the effective leaders of the local church and its mission. As long as a local area continues to be a sustainable community, there is a place for church to be a beacon in that community and these teams have been enabling this to happen in the North Hokianga and Eastern Southland and many other places in between.

This model needs to be supported and strengthened. That means more open acknowledgement of it as a valid front-line form of ministry leadership. A sure sign of that would be education delivery much closer to where the people are. Education in the hinterlands works. Our experience in Northland is that, when workshops are taken to rural areas, the local people turn out in good numbers.

Local education will be enhanced also by good communication and liaison between denominations with a stake in the region. Mutual respect as education providers and a good understanding across denominations of how each one configures their local ministry teams, plus acknowledgement of the different language used, would increase potential opportunities for delivering useful education to rural churches. What this adds up to is the provision of greater assistance for the growth of sustainable ministry and mission in provincial areas.

D.3 Intentional clustering

This is the vision for building cluster connections and thereby assisting in the rejuvenation of rural and small churches. It is something that sometimes happens now through the initiative of individuals. The plan is to make it intentional and co-ordinated.

Clusters or ministers/priests/pastors would be formed within a geographical area, with one person making a commitment to be the hub. This person is the one who facilitates occasional gatherings, triggers an agreed kind of between-time contact (e.g. by way of a phone tree), and generally functions as a link person.

Occasional but regular contacts, face to face or with the use of technology, would be for pastoral reasons – reducing feelings of isolation – and also to share information and good ideas. Benefits will include building relationships and therefore respect across differences in location, theology,

³ The Ecumenical Institute of Distance Theological Studies holds its final graduation on 27 February 2015.

mission priorities, personal interests, and more. This would be significant in strengthening our shared sense of being the body of Christ and the catholicity of that – being the whole body uniquely in each of our locations.

These cluster connections would be built inter-denominationally, as this reflects better the nature of rural churches and it reduces the travel distance for good sized face-to-face groups. This can be done with the help of UCANZ and IRCA-Oceania to identify the people cross-denominationally in particular regions. Not only will it help the individuals involved, but it will be of benefit to the denominations in building cross-denominational understanding and co-operation.

Clustering is a more effective means of connecting people and parishes than standard methods that go with being part of church as institution. It involves networking rather than structural ties, with more reliance on interpersonal communication than meetings, reports, and official dispatches.

The situation in Malawi helped sharpen thoughts already forming around cluster connections. With variable ability to travel, access to internet, or printing facilities, it made sense to propose something that could connect these people, utilising those in easier circumstances to link with those in less so. Those with the means and a will to support others would form clusters with those they have opportunities to contact, by phone or every now and then in person, and make a commitment to maintain connection with them. It is clear that material like the publication from the IRCA conference will rely on such networks if it is to be shared with all who attended, and with numerable others unable to attend. Cluster connections are in themselves a kind of outreach.

In New Zealand something like this already exists by way of the rural ministry network, developed over the years by simply adding the names of people we have come into contact with by various means over the years.⁴ What denominational churches are invited to do is work with rural ministry people to take the network further. Together we can identify clusters in regions, districts, and localities throughout the country.

Establishing relationships between the leadership group of IRCA-Oceania and national and regional courts or synods is one starting point.

This is achievable. It is a specific and realistic way of enhancing mission-focused and sustainable life in rural churches. Conversations have begun in the Far North and as chair of IRCA-Oceania I am keen to get other conversations underway. I invite us to begin with this task and, through the relationships that develop, work together on the other pathways identified in this study.

Robyn McPhail
Churches Together in Northland, Northern Presbytery

4 <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/national-ministries/rural-ministry/rural-network-news>



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**International Rural Churches Association
Voice to the Voiceless**

STATEMENT OF 2014 IRCA
5TH QUADRENNIAL CONFERENCE
HELD IN LILONGWE, MALAWI
July 28 – August 1, 2014

THEME: HOLDING ON TO HOPE

*Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope.
My comfort in my suffering is this: your promise preserves my life. (Psalm 119:49-50)*

We, the seventy-two members of the International Rural Churches Association who have been meeting in the African Bible College Lilongwe, Malawi, for the 5th International Rural Churches Association conference from July 28 to August 1, have this message to share with our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world, our rural colleagues and with the leaders of national and international church organizations. We have been 44 from Malawi, mostly from rural congregations, and 28 international participants from eight countries around the world (India, Romania, Korea, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, UK, US), gathered to explore the theme, Holding on to Hope. For us all, whether local or visitors, it has proven to be an unforgettable experience. For us Malawians to meet and talk with rural Christians from other parts of the world, and likewise for us internationals to learn from such a significant number of Malawians, from all regions of this country, is an amazing opportunity for practical and spiritual enrichment. In worship, in music, in Bible studies, discussions and times of fellowship, we have shared deeply, in a great variety of accents, perspectives and experiences, everyone contributing something different, and yet we have been very aware of our commonality as rural people.

This was the first conference of IRCA held in an African context. In meeting here, rural church people from Malawi were able to share with brothers and sisters the difficult situations under which they minister, the deep poverty of this mainly rural country, the difficulty of communication and travel, the high rates of illiteracy, and sicknesses caused by lack of potable water and sanitation facilities. At the same time we shared similar concerns of rural communities around the world caused by the uncertainties for farmers caused by weather, low commodity prices and high production costs, by governments' lack of concern and poor services.

The hope, which came from the love and support experienced through this community, strengthened IRCA's belief in networking. It encourages us to continue our journey as the people of God, though we know the road will be dusty and full of potholes.

This was also the first conference with a youth caucus. Four international youth and seven youth from Malawi shared activities and fellowship parallel to the conference time, while exploring issues that face the youth of the world (like HIV/AIDS, leadership, drug and alcohol abuse, financial

independence) and ways of approaching them from a faith perspective.

From the conference we bring back to our churches, communities, countries some learnings:

- Commonality of Rural People around the world and our problems.
- Decisions that affect our lives (e.g. by governments) are made far away from the rural context. Unfortunately, decisions that affect our churches face the same problem (church national offices); ultimately we as rural people have to depend on ourselves and on God.
- Therefore, we realize the importance of ecumenical connectedness.
- We will continue to explore fresh ways churches can stimulate community development when resources are slim.
- We recognize the need to develop leaders, both lay and ordained, to increase the effectiveness of the Christian presence in rural areas.
- We commit ourselves to sharing resources with each other, as we develop and maintain a worldwide rural network for a holistic ministry, in order to embrace rural hope.
- We challenge ourselves to take risks to further God's Kingdom.

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

IRCA LEADERSHIP TEAM

August 1, 2014

Jerry Marshall – Chairperson (Director, Arthur Rank Centre, UK)

Catherine Christie – Past Chairperson (United Church of Canada Overseas Personnel Korea, clergy)

Eric Skillings – Secretary (United Church of Canada, clergy)

Garry Hardingham – Treasurer and Past Secretary (Uniting Church in Australia North Queensland Presbytery Minister and Chairperson, clergy)

Kevin Harper – Past Treasurer (Uniting Church in Australia, farmer)

Lothar Schullerus – Representative for IRCA Europe (Protestant Church Switzerland, clergy)

Robyn McPhail – Representative for IRCA Oceania (Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, clergy)

Prasad Rao – Representative for IRCA Asia (Church of South India, bishop Rayalaseema Diocese)

Copeland Nkhata – Representative for IRCA Malawi (Malawi United Methodist Church, clergy)

Dave Ruesink – Representative for IRCA America (Presbyterian Church USA, emeritus professor)

APPENDIX 2

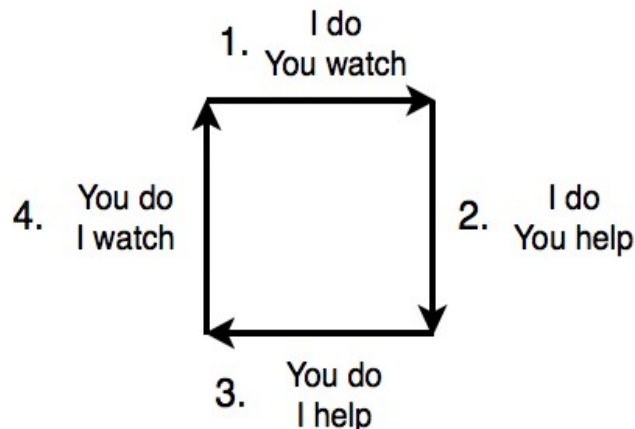
At the IRCA Conference, the NZ caucus of four – Christina Morunga, Gillian-Mary Swift, Janice Purdie, and Robyn McPhail, drew up these responses to two questions put to us by one of the keynote speakers. The questions are asked in relation to rural churches in our country, what we could/will do ourselves and what our national churches need to be doing.

What could be?

- Stronger ecumenical relationships, beyond the local
- Stronger body across NZ for rural/small churches, a louder voice
- Streamlining use of buildings, off-loading, resolving current issues
- Safe place in every rural community for all local youth to gather
- Local church leaders supporting ecumenically to assist with community developments
- Liaising regarding things that are working, and with people with gifts and skills (e.g. Bishop Kito with youth: fun, fellowship, and leadership training and making opportunities for youth to participate in church forums)
- Better recognition of the value of local team ministry
- Better understanding of local team ministry and what it needs

What will be?

- Campaign for “10 Minutes on a Tuesday” (MCNZ)
- Promote the idea of "training without travelling"
- Share Jesus' model of discipleship development – the I do/you do etc. rectangle – with our synods/presbyteries/archdeaconries



- Develop cluster relationships for parishes and for leaders/pastors, identifying what exists and building on it, and forming new linkages.