

The Address of the National Director to the Bush Church Aid Society Annual General Meeting May 2018

The Search for Leadership

What characterises faithful and effective leadership in times of change and challenge? That was the question being asked, implicitly or explicitly, across the Western world in 2017. The breakdown of traditional political alliances and the rise of new populist movements testify to a populace that is deeply anxious about the future.

Christians in Australia were not immune from these developments. The need for redress arising from the issues uncovered by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse and the increasing difficulty in sustaining inherited structures and models of ministry, create a desire for leadership that will grow and sustain hope.

It is perhaps no surprise then that in the past couple of decades a great deal of time and energy has been invested in Australia and elsewhere in searching for new models of church leadership, particularly in rural areas. It is now widely recognised that these investments have not always delivered the degree of sustainable long-term ministry that was desired. In particular, it has proved difficult to pass on the baton to the next generation beyond those originally trained as leaders. In part, this is due to the continuing numerical decline in many rural communities and churches. But I believe there are more fundamental issues at stake.

Digging Deeper

To do better, I believe we need to develop a framework for rural ministry which digs deeper than the issue of leadership. Otherwise, we risk putting a new way of doing leadership over an unchanged way of doing church that rests on an unexamined understanding of mission which in turn reflects an unclear grasp of the gospel.

We need to start deep down and ask key questions which are grounded both in what we have received and the contexts in which God calls us to serve.

Gospel

So we begin with the gospel, by which I mean the royal announcement of what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ – His gracious incarnation, His sin bearing death and His glorious resurrection and ascension which foreshadow the restoration of all things in Him. That is the good news we have received.

But there is a second type of question which takes that good news and applies it to particular rural and regional contexts.

We ask questions like:

- ❖ How is Jesus good news for farming communities, as they farewell many of their youth?
- ❖ How is Jesus good news for mining communities, as they face the challenge of transience and market fluctuations?
- ❖ How is Jesus good news for lifestyle/tourism communities, as they blend different groups with very different worldviews?
- ❖ How is Jesus good news for Indigenous communities, as they confront the ongoing trauma of colonisation?
- ❖ How is Jesus good news for regional centres, as they grow in size and diversity?

Answers to these questions will require both deep grounding in the Scriptures and deep knowledge of particular local contexts. They will also take time to articulate.

Mission

Building outwards from the gospel we then ask questions about mission, by which I mean what God is doing by His Spirit. In this understanding mission is distinct from the gospel but also inseparable from the gospel. We don't collapse the two into each other – for example by assuming what we discern God to be doing in the present *is* the gospel. But neither do we isolate them from each other – for example by treating the gospel as *God's work* and mission as *our work*.

Once again, we need to ask contextual questions. In his book *God's Country: Faith, Hope and the Future of the Rural Church*, Brad Roth lists a number of disciplines that will help us discern the work of God in a particular place.

- ❖ There is the discipline of abiding, taking time to be content in the place God has called us to be.



- ❖ There is the discipline of watching, noticing the story of a particular place to see how it intersects with God's story.
- ❖ There is the discipline of praying, bringing the challenges and complexities of a place to God.
- ❖ There is the discipline of listening, hearing the hopes and fears in the stories of people we encounter.
- ❖ There is the discipline of labouring, faithfully sowing the seed of the Word knowing it will do God's work in God's time.

Church

One of the fruits of mission and sign of the gospel is the formation of the church, and so we need to ask where is God gathering a people? Once again, the questions need to be shaped by local context so rather than searching for buildings and structures perhaps we might ask the following:

- ❖ Where do we see the story of Jesus being remembered, as people meet around the word of God to have their trust in the gospel renewed and strengthened?
- ❖ Where do we see life being shared in table fellowship, through mutual concern and encouragement, through the exercise of gifts given by the Holy Spirit?
- ❖ Where do we see the wider community being blessed through prayer, service and witness?
- ❖ Where do we see a church who knows they are God's people for that place?

Leadership

When we have asked searching questions about gospel, mission and church, we can then turn to leadership and ask who is God calling to serve? This is about far more than just ordination. It is about appropriate recognition, support and affirmation for those women and men who God is already gifting to proclaim the word, care for the flock and most importantly equip all the saints for their work of ministry. That is, we need leaders who have such a confidence in the gospel of God to sustain the mission of God and grow the church of God that they seek from the very beginning to involve and disciple others into their calling.

If there is any merit in the analysis above it highlights the importance of BCA's commitment to supporting ministry that is gospel-based, people-focused and locally-grounded. It also highlights the need to engage across all of our key priority areas.

Meeting our Mission: Pursuing our Priorities

Once again, BCA's Field and other staff have reported their current and planned activities against our key priority areas. In its Annual Meeting over the next two days the BCA Council will engage with this material and also consider how we might establish some strategic goals for each of these areas, to be implemented under God over the next three to five years. Below are some details of how we have moved forward in each of these areas in 2017 through new appointments and initiatives.

Bringing the gospel of Christ to the outermost parts of Australia

Sharing the good news of Jesus is of course central to the ministry of all BCA's Field Staff and Senior Officers. In 2017 we supported a new model of evangelistic ministry through the appointment of Mr James and Mrs Brittany Daymond to serve in the Parish of Narromine and Trangie in the Diocese of Bathurst. Working alongside the pastoral leadership of the church and involving other members of the congregation, they have established an intentional evangelistic ministry which God has already blessed by drawing people to Himself. In time we hope this or a similar model may be replicated in other locations.

Developing a new generation of culturally diverse Christian leaders

The appointment of The Revd Simon and Mrs Alison Reeve to serve in young families' ministry in Woolgoolga and across the Diocese of Grafton, and Mr Topher and Mrs Chica Hallyburton to a Scripture/SRE ministry in Darwin, reflects BCA's longstanding commitment to reaching younger Australians for Christ. At the National level volunteer Mr Don Hodges has helped us access and distribute resources that will enable our Field Staff to respond to the challenges and opportunities of ministry in multicultural Australia.

Supporting ministry by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people

The Revd Neville Naden's appointment as BCA's first full-time Indigenous Ministry Officer was a major highlight of 2017. Neville and his wife Kathie bring a tremendous wealth of ministry and cultural experience. We are already seeing God work through them to increase awareness of the need for training and ministry pathways that will see our ATSI brothers and sisters become a mission force through which God blesses our entire nation. Neville and his support group have been working on a BCA Reconciliation Action Plan which will be considered at this year's Council meeting. At the beginning of 2017 we also celebrated the appointment of Mr Jack and Mrs Lill Harradine to succeed the Nadens at Broken Hill.

Planting and renewing sustainable Churches

Right from its inception BCA has celebrated the unique role of local gatherings of God's people in His plan to reach humanity. Establishing new gatherings and encouraging renewed confidence in Christ in existing ones remains at the heart of our work. In June this year we will conclude our financial support of the ministry of The Revd Andy and Mrs Liz Goodacre at North Launceston, giving thanks to God that over the past seven years He has grown the work so that it is now self-supporting. At the end of 2017 we approved two new couples – The Revd Jamie and Mrs Claire Bester and The Revd Chris and Mrs Naomi Duff – to begin new church planting works elsewhere in the Diocese of Tasmania.

Equipping local leaders for fruitful ministry

This aspect of BCA's work recognises the unique insights and gifts of Christian people who are *grounded* in local communities and churches. Apart from bringing the teaching, mentoring and encouragement provided by our Field Staff and Senior Officers we are always looking for new ways to bring accessible and relevant input to the bush. In 2017 this saw us sponsor a well-attended seminar at Dubbo on ministry to younger people in smaller churches, featuring Mrs Julie Moser from Canada and The Revd Graham Stanton from Ridley College.

Providing care in Christ's Name

As well as the ongoing pastoral support given through Field Staff and churches, BCA has a history of equipping rural churches and Dioceses to respond proactively to needs arising from natural and other disasters. In 2017 this saw us contribute \$45,000 to flood-affected Dioceses in northern New South Wales and Queensland.

Meeting our Mission: Communicating our Message

Communicating BCA's vital mission to Australian Christians so they engage with us through prayer, giving and personal involvement remains a key priority. In 2017 we added 1969 new supporters (compared to 1500 in 2016). Supporters are people or organisations who receive some form of regular communication from BCA, whether through print (eg *The Real Australian* magazine, Prayer Notes), electronic means (eg daily prayer note emails, Field Staff newsletters) or both. We regularly receive positive feedback on the quality of this material and its value in encouraging the prayer lives of those who receive it. At the 2017 Australasian Religious Press Association Awards *The Real Australian* received three awards – for cover design, photography and feature writing.

A further challenge is converting supporters into donors – ie people or organisations who express their commitment to BCA's mission through financial giving, ideally on an ongoing basis. It is of some concern that in 2017 supporter income, including donations for disaster relief, was 2.7 percent down on the previous year. This was the first year we experienced a reduction in supporter income since 2009, which of course was in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis. The major contributors to this reduction were lower receipts from churches and from our Appeals. While less than expected Field expenditures allowed us to achieve an overall result close to budget, it is important that this decline in giving is not sustained if we are to respond to the growing opportunities God is placing before us.

One pleasing aspect of giving was the growth in receipts received through online donations – from \$168,000 in 2016 to \$238,000 in 2017. We continue to work with experts in the field to review our Appeal communication, improve our conversion of supporters into donors and towards the launch of a regular giving program in the second half of the year. In all the above we are grateful to God for giving us what we need to do His work through the generosity of so many of His people.

The BCA Centenary in 2019 is a major opportunity to remind Christians of the need to reach Australia for Christ. In the past year we have appointed Mrs Nola Starmans to renew our archives and Mrs Robyn Powell to prepare a centenary book and video resources. In addition to his duties as Honorary Treasurer Mr Richard Host is working to convert almost 100 years of *The Real Australian* into a format that can be stored and searched online. We continue to be in regular communication with individuals, churches and Dioceses so they can join in praising God for 100 years of faithfulness next May.

Partners in Mission

I continue to be grateful for all who work, whether paid or unpaid, to serve Christ's mission through BCA. In our National and Regional offices, on our Boards and Committees and in churches across Australia we are blessed by men and women who are Christ-centred and servant-hearted. At a time when the integrity of some of those at *the big end of town* has been brought into question, I can assure our supporters that we are committed to using their gifts effectively and efficiently in the service of Christ.

I also want to thank my wife Monica and our children Andrew and Matthew for their love and encouragement, especially when time and travel takes me to other places.

I also want to acknowledge those we have farewelled in 2017:

- ❖ Mr Max Boyley, who together with his wife Jan founded BCA's Nomad ministry.
- ❖ The Revd Paul Dew, who served as the NSW/ACT Regional Officer 2000 to 2006.
- ❖ The Revd David Hand, who served as SA/NT Regional Officer from 2000 to 2005.
- ❖ The Revd Geoffrey Hayles, who served in the Parish of Derby/Broome from 1983 to 1984.
- ❖ The Revd Adrian Roberts Moore who served at Paraburdoo/Tom Price/Wittenoom from 1980 to 1982 and then Port Hedland from 1983 to 1988.
- ❖ The Rt Revd Gerald 'Ged' Muston, who was Federal Secretary of BCA from 1969 to 1971 and later an Assistant Bishop in Melbourne and Bishop of North-West Australia.
- ❖ The Revd Ray Neve, who was BCA Field Staff from 1959 to 1975, serving in Ceduna, Wilcannia and Menindee, Kambalda and Norseman and who later served on the WA Regional Committee and BCA National Executive.
- ❖ Mrs Helen Patterson, a pioneering youth worker and long-term friend and supporter of BCA.
- ❖ Miss Doris 'Dot' Flora Smith, secretary to the BCA National Director from 1970 to 1982, who passed away two days shy of her 100th birthday.
- ❖ Mrs Helena Thorne, who served at Orroroo in South Australia from 1961 to 1965 and at Winton Queensland from 1982 to 1984.
- ❖ Mr Richard Thornton, a faithful BCA supporter and volunteer who for many years helped the National Office with stamps.

Those who were called to other fields of service:

- ❖ The Revd Peter Adkins, who concluded his term as NSW/ACT Regional Officer to serve as Rector of the Parish of Bulahdelah/Tea Gardens in the Newcastle Diocese.
- ❖ Ms Helen Spring, who stepped down after serving as Administrative Assistant in the SA/NT Regional Office for eight years.

For each person we give thanks to God for the ways in which He worked through them to bring blessings to many, not least through the work of BCA.

Leadership: The End of the Search

I began by speaking of our search for faithful and effective leadership in times of change and challenge. Christians know that in Jesus we have not the leader we want, but the leader we so desperately need. As the pioneer and perfecter of faith He not only models perfect trust in the goodness of His Heavenly Father, but opens the way for us to a place of eternal security and rest. In Him we have all that is necessary to be people of generosity and hope. Let us follow Him so that together we may go the distance to reach Australia for Christ.



The Revd Dr Mark Short
National Director – The Bush Church Aid Society of Australia