

Northern Outreach

Beverley Ovens and Kaye Healy challenge us to offer our support and prayer for those ministering in Northern Australia

Northern Outreach Coordinator – Beverley Ovens reports

During 2008 I was given the great privilege of visiting many dioceses in Australia to share the work in which MU is involved world wide.

Two of the dioceses I visited were Northern Territory and North West Australia.

During my visits to these dioceses I was able to see how hard the clergy and their congregations were working together, overcoming great difficulties, such as the transience of population in some areas. This situation can often frustrate the delivery and continuity of Christian ministry.

From what I can gather, isolation and lack of lifestyle stabilisation can often be a determining factor in families. Many have a meagre existence, especially when their survival is determined by a sole parent. In some areas, there has also been a considerable rise in alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence.

For the clergy, and members of the congregation who also live in isolated areas, such circumstances can create equally stressful times. This can be due to the fact that when any service is provided, the same back-up services are not available as in larger centres.

Vice President - Kaye Healy writes:

For clergy families in some remote places, life brings extra stresses to those felt in less isolated centres. In many towns in the North, the clergy family become the stable minority, while others come and go. That may mean that clergy children lose their 'best' friends on a regular basis, and must go through the process of making new friends more often than other children.

Where many parents work in 'fly in/fly out' situations, and a large number of children come from one parent homes, the intact 'traditional' family becomes a minority. The children don't necessarily worry about their friends' home situation, but it could mean that pressures are placed on the children at school because they don't fit the 'norm'. In some communities the clergy family may well be considered 'weird' because they choose to attend church every weekend and choose not to participate in Sunday sport. They may not frequent the local hotel (often a central social gathering place) and they lead a very public life.

Clergy children everywhere can be subject to close scrutiny and expected to be perfect, but in smaller, remote communities this observation is often more intense. It is hard to escape the scrutiny when even a day off is spent in town.

In order to meet with other clergy families it is not a matter of travelling to the next suburb or maybe 50 km to the next town. It is more likely to be several hundred km to travel. To obtain support from other like-minded families often means a long trip and an overnight stay. Sometimes a day off school for children. This is not always easy to organise.

MU helps the clergy families to come together, away from the usual public scrutiny. When they gather at clergy conferences they are not weird or unusual. They are the norm. No-one will criticise the children with, 'Your dad's the minister, you shouldn't do that', because everyone is in the same boat. At clergy conferences they are not under scrutiny, they are just one of the kids.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Having regarded these circumstances we can realise the wonderful opportunity we have in MU to support, encourage, and strengthen families by sharing Christ's love.

Paul's sermon in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) was a pattern of how to preach to those who have no knowledge of, or inclination to consider the Gospel. We can see that Paul's approach was constructive and sensitive. Verse 16, "*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.*" And in Verse 22, "*I see that in every way you are very religious.*" Paul had a great love for the lost and for engaging the lost in dialogue.

MU has this great opportunity to build and support our contacts in Northern Australia. In our mission, we must work at building relationships with people and assisting them with their work. The community is always changing and we often find it difficult to adapt to change. We need to pray in faith that the Spirit of God will continue to change people's lives.

Do we have a siege mentality which kills Missions and our support for families? In Verse 16, Paul used his EYES. 'SEE the city full of idols!'. In verse 22 he 'LOOKED carefully and tried to understand that city.'

In Verse 16 he was also very distressed. He felt extreme emotion. He was moved by the fact that the people were empty and lost. The honour and glory of God should shape our passion, and stir up a love for people; that they will know the truth of the gospel.

We must continue to support, encourage, and pray for those Christians in Northern Australia as they reach out and connect to others.

Pray that God's saving grace will come into the lives of those to whom they minister.