Four Rural Anglican Communities of Faith:

An Ethnography of Hope

By

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of four rural Anglican communities of faith in Tasmania. Drawing on theorists and concepts from both sociology and theology I examine how a new model of ministry (Enabler Supported Ministry) has facilitated re-invigoration, growth, and an outward focus in these rural parishes, which were formerly characterized by decline and impending closure. My study explores how these four parishes, rather than adhering to traditional forms of ministry and resisting change, have embraced change in both ministry and outlook.

My research sits at the boundary between sociology and theology. I draw on theorists such as Weber, Berger, Drane, Lyon, Bouma, Ammerman, and Finke and Stark who, likewise, explore this fruitful and rewarding intersection of the two disciplines. This thesis is primarily sociological but, given the subject matter of the thesis, it is impossible to separate out the theological and by working at the intersection of these two disciplines I hope to produce a rich analysis.

This research is unique and important because it addresses a much-needed area of study in its sociological analysis of rural Anglican parishes in Australia. It is also methodologically innovative because of my ‘insider/outsider status’ and my explicit use of participatory action research. There are surprisingly few ethnographic studies of contemporary Christianity, and very few of contemporary Christianity in rural locations, particularly from an Australian perspective or context. Much of the contemporary sociology of religion literature is either large scale analyses of secondary data charting changes in church attendance based on census figures of religious identification, or studies of new religious movements or minority religious groups of various types.

In this thesis I argue that, despite the complex and interconnected processes characterizing modern society (such as secularization, pluralism, post-modernism, detraditionalization, deinstitutionalization of religious belief, consumer oriented religious preference and fundamentalism), the reason these four rural parishes have
undergone a process of re-invigoration and, each in their own context, have a sustainable future is a combination of both theological and social factors. I describe how, in contrast to their neighbouring parishes which share similar demographic and socio-economic contexts, these four parishes have experienced the longest period of sustained health and stability in their recent history. I would suggest that this is because, in each instance, becoming an Enabler Supported Ministry parish is a homologous response of these parishes to their context. That is, they are sociologically apt; and they are theologically apt, too.
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