

Rural ministry, like all ministries of our diocese during the past two years of the pandemic, have had both challenges as well as surprising successes.

The lock-downs (in 2020 and 2021) have challenged how we conduct worship and stay connected with our congregations. In one way that is made easier by our smaller sizes and well-connected communities, but in another ways that is made more complicated where parishioners are unable to make use of online worship because of inadequate internet coverage, or through sheer physical distances. The successes have come in the rural churches' abilities to connect relatively easily with their communities and be a place of hope and light in difficult times. The surprises have arisen from amazing outcomes where the Spirit has been moving through ministries offered by our rural churches to people outside the church and excitement over those who have come to faith.

Our rural clergy have faced challenges with how smaller congregations have interpreted the Covid protocols. Being a smaller congregation had its advantages and many congregations were able to continue with their regular Sunday worship simply because their average Sunday attendance was less than the maximum number allowed.

I regret that many of the plans for connecting and working together as rural parishes, like a lot of plans, suffered from postponement and cancellation as we tried to keep one another safe during the pandemic. The Rural Church Conference, Oceania IRCA, scheduled for August 2020 was the first casualty, falling as it did within the first lockdown. A workshop for rural clergy facing financial stresses with dwindling numbers and increased costs, likewise was postponed because of the uncertainty around meeting together.

On the plus side, the rural clergy of the diocese were able to meet together while attending the May Clergy Conference in Hanmer. While it was a short time for gathering, we benefitted from sharing ideas, resources and some frank conversation around our many situations.

Respectfully submitted by The Ven Susan Baldwin, Rural Life Missioner.