

Rural Ministry

The **Constitutions** of the Sisters of Saint Joseph reminds us that Mary and Julian in founding the Congregation were responding to needs they perceived in the 'misery and wretchedness' of the 'bush children' and 'the afflicted poor'.

In the book, **Ten Years in the Bush**, 1866 we read that Julian "thought it (*Penola*) was a very pretty, retired spot for a township, with a sedate air of prosperity upon it, which became its small dignity immensely well. I counted the houses ... there were exactly thirty-seven of them, but I include in that enumeration such outbuildings as stables ..."

Rural Ministry goes to the heart of who we are as Sisters of Saint Joseph and those who minister with us in isolated communities scattered across Australia and beyond. Like Mary and the early Sisters, I endeavour to go wherever the poor, neglected little ones live, to share their poverty and way of life and to make human dignity a reality for them. For me living and ministering in the Riverina and before that in the beautiful hinterland of northern New South Wales a word that describes rural ministry is **Presence** – admittedly, a word that is overused and misunderstood. For me the ministry is about **being** – being with the people, experiencing a little of their daily life, their joys and challenges, being available to listen and engage, to support in times of new life, hardships of drought, sorrow of death; visiting people in their homes or meeting them for a cuppa in the local and only coffee shop; gifting others with a welcoming place in which to gather, to talk, to be heard, to share and to rejoice and to live the Gospel with a hope that embraces all.

On a practical level an image that comes to me is that of a **sunflower** that follows the path of the sun. It is the Son that draws forth my gifts to listen, to lead, to pray, to console and to offer a prayer in times of need as well as when gratitude overflows into words of praise and thanks.

Days in the week revolve around people – the parishioners, the locals, the children, the bereaved, and those associated with community activities e.g. monthly senior's luncheon or the fund raisers for everything that occurs from Can Assist to the local show, Lions Club, Mary Gilmore Festival, Museum etc.

Planning for and participating in ecumenical events flows from the meetings with the local churches e.g. APCAT, *Ariah Park Churches Acting Together* and ACAT – *The Ardlethan Churches*. These groups come together for combined liturgies, lead local school church services e.g. Christmas, Easter and Education Week and provide SRE in the local schools.

Please continue reading from the Sisters of Saint Joseph website below:

Weekends are a busy time with Mass being celebrated fortnightly in each community (*part of the Temora Mission with one priest for five communities*) with a lay led liturgy on the alternate Saturday Vigil/Sunday. Covid has demanded that number of worshippers be limited according to what the churches can accommodate. For the parishioners who are unable to join in person they are on the distribution list for the bulletin, reflection on the readings, as well as the Scripture readings of the particular Sunday, prayers and other relevant material.

Reflective and topical inserts for the bulletin gift the parishioners with new insights and connections for further pondering. The opportunity to share a reflection on the readings is a challenge that I enjoy. Encouraging others to share a reflection has proved to be a rewarding and inspiring experience.

Sacramental programs are organised after school with the focus on parents leading the sessions. As well as the parents being enriched as they read the reflective handouts and prepare for the session, the children also are boosted as they experience their parents sharing their faith with them.

Living in the Riverina has been a new experience for me. Even though being reared on a dairy farm in the northern rivers the type of grain harvest that characterises the Riverina is a new experience – but harvest is harvest, whatever the crop; even broom millet which was grown on the family farm in Coraki.

Early in my time in the Riverina while visiting a retired farmer and his wife I was offered a ride on the 'header' – what a happy surprise that was and a thrill that I remember with gratitude. I have to admit that I was not like a priest who commented that when he had a ride on the 'header' he asked the farmer if they could pause for a moment while he prayed the prayer of blessing:

*Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,
for through your goodness we have received
the bread we offer you:
fruit of the earth and work of human hands,
it will become for us the bread of life.*

Ministry and community are intertwined. We are blessed in the Riverina in that we are close enough to meet on a regular basis as we are not too far from one another, different to some communities where Sisters are more isolated than we are. With the benefit of digital technology, being able to stay connected with others further afield is valued. As we continue to live with Covid, connecting digitally is a modern-day treasure.

I give thanks to God for the call to be with people in rural areas. Gifts have flowed into my life in ways that are unexpected; the courage and resilience of the people have renewed my spirits; the faith and hope of others have reminded me that God embraces all; the dedication and generosity of the people to keep their town alive when so much is taken away from them spurs me on to further action; the love that reaches out and accepts challenges invites me to make room for all; the welcome and acceptance that have embraced me reinforces for me the richness of true hospitality.

I love these people. I feel blessed to be sharing their lives and I am thankful that I have been called to take my part in this way as a Josephite. In this, the tenth year since the Canonisation of Mary of the Cross, it is my hope that a Josephite presence will continue to reach out to our isolated, rural communities.

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