

PROF HELPS PIONEER REVOLUTION IN RURAL MINISTRY



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In what could herald a revolution in ministry for small rural centres, Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre Professor Tom Frame has been appointed to a 'tent-making' unpaid position overseeing the new Mulwaree Mission District.

"Having this ministry responsibility gives me credibility among ministry students. I will be sharing their struggles first hand", he said.

The new Mission District consists of four churches near Tarago, with the small congregation meeting one week per month at each building. The break with Bungendore parish was entirely amicable. "I'd like to think it has given Bungendore some new options", Prof Frame says.

The Mulwaree Mission District is not a one-off. In a parallel development the Diocese has also created the Sutton Road Mission District to be led by the Rev'd Dr Peter Grundy and a possible stand-alone ministry in Marulan – at the initiative of Bishop Stuart Robinson.

A key factor in the strategy is that Prof Frame is already local. He lives on a property near Tarago and understands the rhythms of the local community. He is part of the community fabric such as the Rural Fire Brigade.

Prof Frame says the core idea behind the strategy is that Christian ministry should align with natural community.

"We relate to Goulburn not 'down the hill' to Canberra or Bungendore. Our natural alignment – social, political, economic – is with Goulburn. We shop in Goulburn. Our local Council is Goulburn-Mulwaree."

In just the past three months there has been an increase – albeit from a small base – in activities, money and membership for the new Mission District. Average attendance is up 50 percent from 10 to 15. They are planning outreach events and creative liturgies to re-engage with local people.

"[The new structure] helps people believe the Church is invested in their community", Prof Frame says. "They now see that they are resourcing a local endeavour."

A key part of the strategy is targeting villages that are becoming dormitory suburbs of Canberra such as Sutton, Collector and Currawang.

“It is about preventing the closure and sale of small rural congregations”, Prof Frame says. “In one sense it’s a holding operation for the future when these areas become more densely populated.”

Nevertheless Prof Frame believes the strategy is entirely replicable in other rural areas.

“Any parish with four or more centres should have a think about this approach. Start by analysing the natural communities and working with and not against local allegiances”, he said.