

Beyond 2000—what follows the Year of the Outback?

Rosemary Young, Frontier Services, South Sydney

I want to talk today about the challenge of sustaining community, of ensuring that community in rural and remote Australia is supported, sustained, resourced and encouraged, even beyond the focus that was created during 2002, the Year of the Outback.

I want to touch upon things you all know because you are either working in rural and remote Australia or because you are involved with organisations which serve those regions.

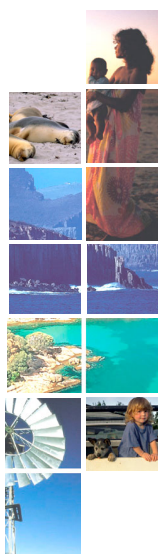
We all know the history of settlement, the arrival of those who thought the land uninhabited and who started to move through the land, sweeping aside those who already resided here. We know that people went out to start their pastoral endeavours, coming together in small groups, comprised at that time almost entirely of men. They didn't have the security to bring their women to, let alone to raise children in, the remote places where they settled. There was, however, a community in the sense of support, commonality of purpose and the drive to open up the bush.

In those very early times we saw the churches and other organisations start to go out amongst those who were settling the remote regions, and the beginning of the development of services. In our case Revd John Flynn, who established the Australian Inland Mission in 1912, saw the need for Patrol Ministers (padres as they were known), to travel amongst these remote communities extending the hand of friendship. He and others clearly perceived the need for nursing services, the medical support which would allow men to feel confident to bring their wives out to join them, and to raise their families in the bush.

Over time, outpost nursing clinics were established in many remote communities, providing the security that allowed families to settle and community to further develop. These days governments have taken over, quite appropriately, most of those services. Many of the little communities in which nursing clinics were first established no longer exist but, where they do, they are very often run by State and Territory health departments, although Frontier Services still operates five clinics in remote Western Queensland and northern South Australia.

And so, we saw the small communities develop with the localised services contained within them. These were times of plenty, times when pastoral industries flourished, when the mining industries started to develop in Australia, when things were just wonderful in rural and remote Australia!

Mercifully those times saw the development of quite extensive support services, community services and the development of infrastructure – because those times have passed.



As they passed, governments particularly, but banks and other service providers, saw the opportunity to devolve their services from the smaller remote communities and to gather them in the regional centres and so we saw larger centres develop while smaller communities, in some cases, disappeared.

Today, we see rural and remote Australia affected by depopulation, by the collapse of rural industries, by factors of isolation, at least psychological if not physical, and more recently by drought and fire. The challenges for the future are that organisations, such as our own, must ensure positive discrimination not only by us, but also by government and other service providers, to ensure the renewal and revival of outback Australia. We must ensure adequate transport services, health services, mental health services, telecommunications and perhaps most particularly, hope. We need to deal with issues of land care, we need to deal with issues of salinity, and we need to deal with issues of water. We need a national infrastructure investment plan to deal with the economic, physical and social infrastructure needs of remote Australia. We have to deal with environmental repair and a national transport strategy and the chronic problems of unemployment in the bush. And we must, in doing all of this, ensure that local resources are utilised.

We celebrate the assets and the strengths which are present in rural and remote communities, recognising that people need the energy which can be generated and sustained from within, if we can play a role as catalyst and enablers. The critical role that our organisations can play is based on the fact that we are staying there – that when others have said “too far, too hard, too costly”; that we are connecting people and that by doing those things, we are strengthening communities.

People of every culture, every age and every social situation find the unique hardships of the Australian outback challenging.

For Aboriginal communities it is the challenge of maintaining the strength and inspiration of their tradition while building contented and fulfilling lives against a background of historical disadvantage and exclusion.

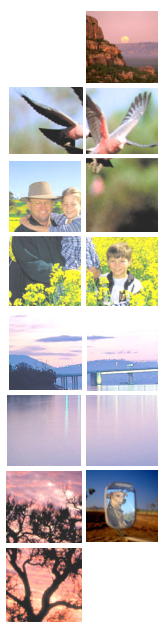
For families with young children isolated from social interaction and remote from the normal systems of family and community, it is the fear of being unable to provide for the emotional, physical and spiritual essentials in the development of the children.

For aged people, it is the fear of having nowhere to live and of being rooted out and transplanted to a foreign place or simply being left to fend for themselves.

For thousands, it is the confusion of uncertainty, of not having someone to talk to about the spiritual, moral and other life issues.

And so, it is critical that we are there to do what we can, each in our own way, to address those issues. It is easy to think that the problems are overwhelming and that the little bit that we can do may not make a great difference. The fact, that we do it together is what makes it possible. Every service, every individual committed to, and connected with, rural and remote Australia, makes their own difference. Collectively we can renew the heart of rural Australia.

Those of us who live and work in remote communities know that it will take a number of key strategies to sustain, to support and to encourage community into the future.



We not only need our communities to survive, we want them to flourish. We need them to flourish in order that the whole nation may benefit from that which has been contributed by those who live at a greater distance from the coast. We need to be innovative, we need to be brave, we need to take risks, but we need, first of all, to make that commitment.

Rural and remote communities are the heart of this continent and critical to maintaining a nation with a soul. Without the heart, we cannot be the nation we are proud to consider ourselves.

So I think that we need to remind ourselves that every little bit counts and that, together, we will be out there, in the silence, singing.

PRESENTER

Rosemary Young is the National Director of Frontier Services. She is the first woman and the first lay person to hold that position, having previously served Frontier Services as National Community Services Manager from 1995 until January 2000. Rosemary has lived and worked in remote South Australia and brings a passion for the Outback to her role.

Frontier Services is the successor to the Australian Inland Mission, founded by the Reverend Dr John Flynn and has been serving those isolated by distance for over 90 years. Frontier Services cares for individuals and families living in isolated and remote areas through health care, family and children's services, aged and disabled care, migrant services, community support, accommodation for students, counselling and a range of other community services in addition to providing a patrol ministry covering 85% of the continent. Every year Frontier Services provides support to tens of thousands of people in Outback Australia through over 400 staff and more than 60 programs. It is the largest provider of aged care in remote Australia.

Rosemary is a member of the Board of Governors of the Australian Council of Social Services, a member of the Australian Council of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, a member of the Board of Uniting Care Australia and of the Commonwealth Personal Support Program Reference Group.

