The Christian Research Association undertook a study for the SA UCA Synod/Presbytery in 2008 considering patterns of ministry, in particular lay leadership, and models for the future in the rural church. The study is now published as a public report: *Rural Churches in the Uniting Church in South Australia: Models for Ministry* by Philip Hughes and Audra Kunciunas, CRA Research Paper No. 7, October 2008, pp. 24 (including references and bibliography). Cost: $18.00 per copy (postage included - Discounts for bulk orders).

For a wider look about the state of the Christian faith in rural Australia see the overview article in the December 2007 edition of Pointers, the CRA Bulletin. The statistics are based on NCLS material and the 2006 Census.

South Australia Uniting churches are a key group for this area of research because they have been at the forefront of changes, for example, developing lay ministry teams in the 1990s to cope with the loss of ordained and stipended ministers. Many areas of rural South Australia still have high levels of Uniting Church identification reflecting the high Methodist proportion in the state and the establishment of churches and preaching places throughout small communities. Overall in South Australia, 10% of the population identify with the Uniting Church, but it is higher in rural areas (14%) to Adelaide (8%), and in some of the case studies, about 25%.

The statistical overview is provided from the standard sources: Census 2006, National Church Life Survey (NCLS), as well as case studies. 237 Uniting Churches took part in the study for NCLS, with two thirds in rural areas.

This is a very interesting paper for the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, given the high level of ACC membership in SA, especially in rural areas, and also individual membership as well. ACC is mentioned (actually termed Association in the document), in the context of support and also theological orientation (p.19). Of the eleven actual congregational case studies reported (one page on each), the following are ACC members: *Crystal Brook; Lock; Port Vincent.*

The other congregations are:
- *Kingston SE; Millicent; Padthaway; Pinnaroo; Renmark; Spalding; Wilmington; Wudinna and Districts.*

There are excellent photos of each church building, showing a wide diversity of architecture within the communities. Attendance at the congregations varied from 10 to 60, with 30 the average. In most cases leadership was provided by lay people within lay teams.

The paper provides information about the organisational structures and leadership arrangements by locality (rural and Adelaide for comparison); and comments on the wellbeing of leaders, and the church and relationship to the community, and discusses the impact of these areas on the vitality of a church.
While it is better for the reader to consider the whole paper, I was interested to read of the feedback on the role of the Networks (SA does not have presbyteries as such any more); which was varied, though Hope Network is particularly mentioned for the support it provides to member churches (p. 22). There is also consideration of the ecumenical environment, as these relationships are very prominent in South Australia rural communities, and in some cases lead to formal co-operation; apart from the obvious fact that in some cases, the Uniting Church simply attracts people from different denominational backgrounds because it is the main or sole Protestant church in the area. I also found interesting the comments on the amazing faithful witness of local people in difficult circumstances, the role helpful administration (some places had dedicated administration support that helped the overall co-ordination of a lay ministry team). Reflections are provided on a number of areas including: appropriate theological training for lay people; distance difficulties; and the support for and the work of Rural Mission Planners, and suggestions about building on this work through the resourcing opportunities of the rural resource ministers.

This paper outlines the critical situation of the rural church in Australia, and in particularly the Uniting Church in South Australia, and the need to address the issues that are arising now, rather than later.

The Christian Research Association is planning a rural ministry conference (for all denominations) for May 2009. For further information or to order the paper please contact: Christian Research Association.
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Note: all SA Congregations will receive a copy of the report, as well as Synod representatives.

Peter Bentley
29 October 2008