

## **Submission from Rev Michael Willsmore / The Presbyterian Inland Mission / SW NSW Patrol, Nichols Point, VIC**

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### **SUBMISSION TO EXPERT PANEL DROUGHT POLICY REVIEW**

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Victoria**

The Presbyterian Inland Mission is an arm of the Presbyterian Church of Australia that has been seeking to service the needs of people in the remote and isolated regions of Australia since its inception as the Australian Inland Mission under the Rev John Flynn in 1912.

For nearly 100 years the Mission has been sending forth padres into the rural communities of Australia to provide for the spiritual, practical, emotional and physical needs of people living in the outback.

Whilst our role is primary a spiritual one that seeks to bring eternal hope and peace to people through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, it also seeks to provide practical assistance in a variety of ways to the people we visit.

In recent years helping people manage to cope with the impact of drought, spiritually, emotionally and physically has been a major focus of our work.

For the past 5 years I have worked in the Far SW of NSW as a patrol padre visiting people on properties and in small isolated communities on behalf of the Presbyterian Church and it is on the basis of this experience that I make this submission.

#### **My experience of the impact of drought upon community development and sustainability in rural Australia**

The drought is forcing families to sell up property and move away from communities they have lived in for many generations.

These properties are often being brought by big companies and outside concerns. They then put managers in who are generally new to the area.

These managers generally tend to stay for a couple of years before moving on to other positions.

This is causing a breakdown in the social structure within that local community as people lose long time friends and neighbours and people still living in the

area suddenly find they have a stranger living on the property next to them. They then have to work at forming friendships all over again.

It can also mean less money being spent in the local community as the population decreases and a decrease in the availability of other services (teachers, banking, shops etc).

### **In what ways could community development and sustainability programs and policies be better adjusted to address the impact of drought?**

I think one thing that could be done is to encourage government and non-government agencies to maintain their presence in these rural towns rather than look at relocating them.

This would then provide easier access for people seeking the services of these agencies, provide a greater base of local knowledge, and provide much needed income sources in these smaller communities.

### **What the Presbyterian Inland Mission is trying to do to address this in SW NSW**

Provide opportunities for people to mix socially at community gatherings by helping to organize helping sponsor such events as Picnic Days, Farm Family Fun Days and Local Festivals as our finances allow.

Providing church services at the invitation of the communities in which we work.

Attending community gathering as we can to show our support for the locals.

Buying fuel and food in those local communities.

### **My experience of the impact drought has upon families**

Less income to spend on themselves impacting upon the community activities they can be involved in because of either the cost of those activities or the cost of getting to and from those activities owing to the high price of fuel.

Less income to spend on farm labour, meaning that mum and/or the children usually ends up helping dad with the work. There is then the need to find a governess to assist with the schooling if the children are of school age.

One of the family members may have to look for and take up off farm work to supplement the family income. This may mean mum or dad being away from home. This places extra stress/pressure on the family unit and the person caring for any children.

Having younger family members leaving the farm to look for work leaving elderly mum and dad to run the place while they are gone. This places a burden physically and mentally on an age group that would normally be preparing and planning for retirement.

**In what ways could programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought on families?**

I believe any government must very carefully consider how to continue to support families living with and trying to make a living with drought.

To that end I would like to see an extension of the drought support scheme that would enable families to continue to farm the land as long as possible.

I think it would be helpful if government were able to assist in some way with the succession planning process by providing free and ready access to people with these skills to help families work through all the issues of whether to stay or to sell.

**What the Presbyterian Inland Mission is trying to do to address this**

Bring together volunteer work parties from across Presbyterian congregations to assist property owners' complete projects that they have been prevented from doing because of the drought and the resultant lack of money to pay contractors or hire staff. These projects can range from assisting with mustering jobs, building machinery sheds, renovating homesteads, laying pipelines, erecting fencing etc.

Paying household bills, medical expenses and other accounts as our funding allows.

Providing food parcels as needs become known.

Being a listening ear to people who need someone to talk to.

Referring people to professionals for help in the area of mental and physical health, financial counselling etc.

Praying for the people that we work with.

Providing 'property sitters', these are hand picked volunteers from Presbyterian Church congregations who can go onto a property for a week or two and manage it whilst the owners go away for a break or for other reasons such as seeking medical help, or recover from operations.