

FIVE OUTBACK COMMUNITIES

In early 2009 Bill and Pauline drove into the Northern Territory excited, afraid and challenged about a change of lifestyle, culture and home. God had clearly directed them to the remote Indigenous communities of Kalkaringi and Lajamanu. They spent the first year building relationships and learning a new way of life.

Seven years later they have grown in their relationship with Jesus and have been constantly challenged about how to serve, support and love those around them.

Recently we have been invited to support three additional communities of Yuendumu, Ali-Curung and Willowra in the southern region of the Northern Territory, near Alice Springs. While they are similar to the two communities we have worked with, there are also many differences.

Past Global Interaction workers have spent many years building strong relationships with the people and churches in these areas. It's amazing to enter these communities as outsiders, yet be so warmly welcomed and accepted just because of the trust and relationships with the Global Interaction family. For example, just ten minutes after driving into Ali-Curung we had a welcoming committee of about 15 people waiting for us at the house.

Relationships are very important in Indigenous life, and everything that happens in community hinges around relationship. Remote communities are made up of family groups, often living together in overcrowded housing situations.

Amidst the changes we face, our one focus remains clear – to empower the Indigenous communities to follow Jesus in their own distinctive ways. This is the mission before us each day.

Our role is to build relationships, teach and mentor church leaders and provide support and encouragement for the people. As leaders are raised up they, in turn, train and teach others to follow Jesus in their own distinctive way. This builds confidence, strength and a sense of ownership among the group. We spend time teaching one-on-one with the leaders, enabling them to teach at bush training camps and preach in services. They are hungry for more knowledge and experience and want to lead their communities more effectively.

While our aim is to give the local church the tools and confidence to be able to run themselves, this will take time. One saying we have heard is, "White fellas have the watches. We have the time." That becomes very evident when we are still sitting and waiting at 9pm for the 7pm sing-a-long service to start! You learn that it will start at the "right" time, irrespective of what the clock says.

There is much joy in the churches when a person comes into relationship with Jesus. However, it is often very challenging for a new believer to put their faith into practice. Often there is internal conflict between being in relationship with Christ and maintaining cultural practices. It is fascinating to observe how the Christians in the community decide which cultural norms are OK, and which might need changing or rejecting because of their faith. We have seen some practices that were normative in the community been done away with under the influence of their Christian understanding.

One of the women had been a church leader and great example of Christ for many years. She has led many to the Lord, leads worship, mediated community disagreements and had a deep faith in God which gave her peace and comfort. However, a difficult family issue became so hard for her to resolve that her church involvement was put to the background. Arguments, fighting and misunderstandings resulted in unrest in her family and the wider community.

For many months her Christian friends sat with her, prayed, encouraged and assisted in mediation. Her friends knew that the biggest challenge for her was to resist the cultural norms of blame and payback, and instead to forgive and reconcile.

How was it resolved? She simply stood up the front of church one Sunday morning and confessed, asking God and the church to forgive her. She said, "I am going to take time to heal on this one!" What a joy it was to witness the church community embracing, encouraging and praying for her there and then.

The men's group at Kalkaringi meet every Tuesday. During their studies and discussions, issues of culture and faith surface regularly. It has been a privilege to see the growth they have experienced as they continue to stand for Jesus in how they live.

There are many churches in the communities that are translating Christian songs into their own language and writing their own songs. We encourage the locals to preach and sing in their own heart language. Occasionally there are some white fellas who visit the communities, and some who also live in the communities, who have approached us requesting the service to be done in English. Hello! Who are the majority people in this community? Haven't we learnt from history that that's a bad idea?! As difficult as that is for the white people, we're glad that the church is taking responsibility for their Sunday service and are using their own language.

Connecting with the five communities regularly is a big task, but one that we are committed to for the long-term. Global Interaction is seeking a couple or family to work with us to help share the load. These churches have gifted and passionate local men and women serving them who need encouragement, a listening ear and prayer. Maybe God is prompting you to join us?

