

## **Proceedings of Main Item “Re-imagining Rural Ministry” from November 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Devon Churches Rural Forum**

### **Introduction and Strategy Development**

Mark Butchers summarised the recent Exeter Diocesan “Re-imagining Rural Ministry” day workshop convened by Bishop Robert on 11<sup>th</sup> November. The day had reflected upon how rural ministry used to be and how it has changed, and given the realities of available resources and the missional imperative, how we need to re-imagine the models we work through.

Corporate ministry and the need to re-energise lay ministry were important areas of discussion, and models from other countries (notably New Zealand) were explored. Going forward we will need good theological reflection but the following points indicate a direction to move in:

- a) There is encouragement and “permission” to experiment
- b) Pilots exploring new models should be theologically resourced
- c) There should be a review of administrative needs, and a vocation to parish administration explored
- d) We want to learn from each other, nationally, globally and ecumenically
- e) We will work towards a day conference for wider “Re-imagining of Rural Ministry” in Devon.

Alison Ball reported on the development of the Plymouth and Exeter Methodist District emerging rural strategy. She said it was interesting that the request for this had come from the chapels up, rather than the centre down – demonstrating the need felt on the ground. There is a clear recognition that “rural” is different from other ministry contexts and that for a church of a given size, it is likely that a rural church will be more connected with its local community than a suburban one. She also said amongst rural ministers – lay and ordained – there is a huge passion for rural ministry. The Methodist church is focusing more on lay posts, partly because of the difficulty in filling all the presbyter posts, and in one circuit, acting as a pilot, there is now one superintendent minister caring for 13 churches with all the other posts filled with lay people in pastoral and teaching roles. There may be concerns however, particularly regarding accountability if ministers become too isolated in their working. Circuits are also developing their own strategies going forward, and the District is sharing learning from these.

Jon Oliverio spoke of similar discussions within the URC church, where, in order to reach the usual ratio for church members and ministers, one minister needs to cover a very wide

geographical area. The URC is therefore looking at more of a team approach with the minister training and enabling lay ministry.

Shaping Strategies for multi church groups (published April 2017) offers a useful summary of the needs and situation of rural ministry and speaks of the need for the development of the whole church's ministry, working collegially, with local, high quality lay training, space for the new to work alongside the old, partnership working with schools and ecumenically, the need for simpler structures and systems and the use of new pioneer type posts.

### **The Bright Field Community**

Simon Franklin spoke about the Bright Field Community. The community is now three years old and formed from a group of rural church leaders with a passion for rural ministry but concerned about the old models leading to unrealistic expectations. They have grown together to form "community" and meet to share food, study and theological reflection. They offered a "re-imagining rural ministry" day in Okehampton in May which was over-subscribed, demonstrating a need to explore these issues. Going forward, new, local Bright Field Communities are being explored across Devon. There is also an emerging lay Bright Field community supported by Bath and Wells diocese.

Local Bright Field Community groups, and Mission Sheds, are examples of resourcing locally – where people are – which is important for encouraging corporate and lay ministry.

Simon also discussed the way we promote rural leadership. Rural ministry is special and to be enjoyed, yet is not always presented so. It is also "cutting-edge" in its approach to finding new models of ministry because the old model is broken – whereas in some more suburban areas the need for change is not so apparent.

### **Models of Rural Ministry and Ecclesiological Implications**

**Carlisle Diocese** have developed a formal ecumenical approach between Anglican, Methodist and URC churches, with other denominations joining where they have presence in a community. The model is based on Mission Communities and team leadership. More can be found at the ecumenical website they have set up <http://www.godforall.org.uk/>

During his recent Sabbatical, Simon Franklin conducted research into models of rural ministry in **New Zealand**. In the Diocese of Auckland in particular, a model called "**Local Shared Ministry**" has been developed (more information and papers circulated by Simon can be found on our DCRF website [here](#)).

In the NZ model there are two sets of leaders – one set looks after the more "administrative" needs of the church and the other the mission and ministry. People who have been given the gifts needed to fulfil these roles are called out from the congregation. If the congregation is very small, then only a few will be called, the idea being to work with

what you have locally. There is also an “Enabler” role, a person who supports several churches, provides a theological presence and a resource to help the community grow in Christ.

Susanna Metz said that the diocese of **Northern Michigan** in the USA has been operating this type of model which is called **Mutual Ministry** ([find out more here](#)) with impressive results. Once again it espouses the belief that the local church has everything it needs to minister effectively. Susanna also recommended a book on the subject she had found very helpful “Born of Water, Born of Spirit” ([see more here](#)) which is subtitled “Supporting the ministry of the Baptised in small congregations”. Northern Michigan is a small diocese and very rural and needed to work differently because of its geography.

Mark Butchers spoke about the diocese of Kuruman in southern Africa, which has a geographical area the size of Germany, but less than 20 stipendiary clergy, and that though the people didn’t see a clergy person for long periods of time there was a real sense of life in the churches and perhaps a lack of clergy led to the flourishing!

There is a need to review our ecclesiology in deliberations of models of rural ministry – to look back into the roots of the Christian church – rather than what has been passed on to us as a more recent model. The New Zealand churches have based much of their thinking on the work of Roland Allen, a missionary in Africa, whose basic assertion is that “every congregation has within its own membership sufficient gifts for its own life and mission”. This says that we already have what we need to minister in the place where we are and leads to the understanding that a truly indigenous church – that comes from its community, and fits the shape of its community, will grow.

We need to ask questions such as “What do we understand by ordination?” and the roles of lay and ordained both need to be re-defined. This point was picked up later also by Adrian Brooks – not only in the sense of what priests themselves and the local church believe the role of the priest to be, but how this is perceived by the local community.

Paul Seaton-Burn spoke of the need for structural changes, which will be very hard, but new structures will be needed that ministry and change can grow from. Mark Butchers commented that there would need to be shifts of power within the church.

David Ursell asked if the question of lay presidency had been addressed as part of the NZ model. The answer is not yet, but Simon said that the Methodist church in NZ has also taken on the “Local Shared Ministry” model and have included lay presidency within this.

Adrian Brooks also raised the question about the importance and centrality of the Eucharist in new models under exploration. Simon Franklin referenced Tim Gibson’s book “Church and Countryside” ([find out more here](#)) in which he talks about transformation coming from gathering around word and sacrament – focusing more on the sacraments rather than the concept of priesthood itself. Paul Seaton-Burn also commented that if the church is to be

“indigenous” and “of the place” then the model of ministry would need sensitivity and flexibility in respect of the local tradition

### **Shared “administrative/building support” at the appropriate level**

In the New Zealand model, administrative support takes some of the strain from those more involved in front line mission and ministry. Adrian Brooks commented on the administrative side of the model – that it would be good to have project managers for building projects, for example, as an available resource at diocesan level, and not only at deanery. By looking at what “administrative” support is best provided at what level – and enacting this - congregations could be freed immensely for mission and ministry.

### **Enabling and local ownership**

John Wibberley stressed the need for clergy to be enablers and to support each other in groups to avoid isolation, as is being encouraged with our farmers. He also spoke of the need for changes to be locally owned, with the vicar, or other minister/external resource, acting as chaplain to the process and not the leader so that ideas and ownership come from the people. It is also important to help congregations realise that these new approaches are not all about money – but about being the church and using the resources, gifts and talents we have been given, as the Holy Spirit wants us to be. Simon Franklin concurred and noted that in New Zealand, before anything else, there is a one year conversation with the local community, to develop the ecclesiological understanding and develop local ownership so that the new model has commitment from the beginning.

Martyn Goss spoke about the ABCD (Asset Based Community Development” approach, ([link here](#)), which focuses on taking the gifts and strengths that are already present in a community and using them for the common good. He said that most lay ministry takes place in the home, workplace or social situations and this model can enable lay people to focus on their ministry in the world.

Jon Oliverio added that part of the “asset map” of the ABCD approach included mapping all local denominations to bring all to work together. He also spoke about the URC resource and challenge to churches “Walking the Way” ([find out more here](#)) which is about living the life of Jesus today and challenges churches to make disciples rather than members.

Growing the Rural Church is working with Mosaic Creative, who have developed ideas from “[Umoja](#)” and has similarities to the ABCD approach.

Maurie Webber spoke about the report “Setting God’s people free” which focuses on encouraging the gifts of the laity ([link here](#)) and for lay people to be more involved in all aspects of the church.

## **Ecumenical and other Partnership Working**

Working ecumenically in general, and the Anglican Methodist covenant in particular, must be made real and there was general support for exploring collaborative models for rural ministry across the denominations.

Derek Baker spoke about the “Filling Station” movement which hosts midweek “celebration meetings” to resource Christians from all denominations. There is a rurally based Filling Station in West Devon ([link here](#)).

[Lee Abbey](#) have offered themselves as a resource and are planning a Rural Conference for 2019 and offer training days in missional leadership. Further partnership working between Lee Abbey and the Growing the Rural Church Project and with Mission Shed and other specific mission events will be explored. **Action: Invite Nick Haigh (Mission Chaplain Lee Abbey, to DCRF).** SWMTC and St Mellitus training colleges are also available for theological support.

Annie Jefferies asked, since colleagues such as the NHS and Social Services, outside our church structures, are now much more willing to work in partnership with churches, whether we could include partnership working as a subject in our conference on the subject. Marian said that partnership working with the secular services was already on the Growing the rural Church agenda and Mark voiced concern that our last conference had perhaps tried to be too wide and we would need to keep focused. Looking towards working with partners would be an intrinsic part of the Asset Based Community model as we seek to share the gifts of all in our communities.

## **Pilots and Experimentation**

Marian highlighted the deanery and Mission Community (which are co-terminus) of Holsworthy which comprises 22 churches, with 5 benefices and 4 stipendiary clergy, two of whom will be retiring in two to three years, when the stipendiary resource will likely drop from 4 to 3. There is thus an opportunity to begin to re-shape, experiment and think theologically to arrive at the preferred way forward before the retirements are due. Bishop Robert has given permission for experimentation and with resource from Growing the Rural Church Project, St Mellitus and SWMTC and possibly Lee Abbey there is a very good opportunity to pilot, learn and develop both for Holsworthy and for wider application.

## **Conference**

The idea of a wider DCRF conference later in 2018 looking at this subject received approval.

## Actions

It was agreed that Penny, Annie, Elaine and Marian would meet to discuss how to take the partnership working agenda forward in the work of the Forum (please refer also to May meeting notes on this topic).

Simon, Marian, Susanna, John, Alison and Mark would work on planning a “Models of Rural Ministry” day conference. Mark to convene a meeting

## Summary

- There is commonality in the new and emerging models of rural ministry and mission from our different denominations, in the UK and around the world, and all have at their heart the need for all God’s people to work together as one body to serve their communities and for everyone’s gifts to be recognised and enabled.
- The shape of the local church will be in and of its local community and will hold within itself all the gifts it needs.
- It is important to note that new models are not only necessary as a result of finite resources but are about being the church and using the resources, gifts and talents we have all been given, as we are called by the Holy Spirit.
- This has implications for our ecclesiology including questions about the role of the ordained.
- Rural ministry is exciting, cutting edge, different from other contexts and needs particular training. We don’t always advertise it as such!
- In practical terms, centralising and sharing administrative functions at an appropriate level within the church structures would help immensely to release both clergy and congregations for mission and ministry.
- Church structures will need to be changed to support new emerging models.
- Locally based training and enabling is vital.
- Working ecumenically and with other partners (church based and secular) is part of the new way forward in calling forth the gifts of the whole community.
- New resources are emerging to support, and a welcome emphasis is being placed on, the ministry of all believers taking place in homes, workplaces and leisure activities.
- It takes time for shared conversations to lead to local ownership of new models – working with churches well before clergy retire or are not replaced is essential.
- Pilots and experiments in new models of ministry should be theologically resourced.
- A DCRF conference on “Re-imagining models of rural ministry” will be planned for later in 2018.