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Travelling Congregations or Fixed Provision? Assessing Models of Rural Ministry

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies a research question about the way in which rural churches offer worship, the question being, ‘which is more effective as a way of delivering worship: a travelling congregation or fixed provision?’ It is a question about which much has been assumed, but on which little research has been done. The article employs the method of participant observation, by which the question is located and researched within a specific local context, the multi-church benefice of Teme Valley South. Numerical data were collected over a four year period, and on the basis of these data it has been possible to describe the extent to which people did and did not travel to attend worship. The implications of what was observed are considered and carry far reaching consequences for the Church.

KEYWORDS

Rural church; patterns of ministry; empirical research; participant observation

Introduction

When I was helping out a church in vacancy, the churchwarden updated the congregation about what was happening in respect of the appointment of a new priest. That process was running alongside amalgamating that church with an adjoining church. The churchwarden told the congregation that, as of the following month, their weekly 8.00 am communion service would be held jointly with the neighbouring church, taking turns as to which church hosted the service. So, he announced, there would be twice as many people and twice the size of congregation. As a visiting priest filling in during a vacancy I said nothing. However, the cheerful upbeat announcement carried a lot of assumptions about what would happen. It assumed that people would travel from one church to the other; it assumed that consequently the congregations would be larger; and it assumed that larger congregations are better.

This highlights a question about which much is assumed but about which little (if any) previous research has been done. The question is, ‘which is more effective as a way of delivering worship: a travelling congregation or fixed provision?’. With a travelling congregation worshippers are expected to know where church worship will be provided on different Sundays. They are expected to travel to where the service is provided. With fixed provision there is a service in the same church at the same time week-by-week. Fixed provision was (largely) the norm until reduction in clergy numbers made it difficult. As clergy numbers

have reduced, the model of the travelling congregation has become predominate. Arguments can be made for both models. The case can be made for travelling congregation on the basis of unity and as an expression of the oneness of neighbouring churches. The case can be made for fixed provision on the basis of localism and that churches function as particular expressions of Christian faith in a particular places.

As long ago as 1990 in *Faith in the Countryside* there was an affirmation of fixed provision. The report said, 'We endorse the aspiration for ... worship in the local church on a ... weekly basis' (Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, 1990, p. 188) and 'We are clear that priority should be given to the local expression of ... worship' (p. 312). That endorsement was described by subsequent writers (mainly clergy) as 'not possible' (Davies, Watkins, & Winter, 1991, p. 226), 'an ideal to work towards' and 'difficult to achieve' (Cutts, 1990, p. 12), with 'fortnightly worship being more ... realistic' (Went, 2004, p. 223). The resultant pattern of worship existing in many churches is, 'a bit of a railway timetable' (Davies et al., 1991, p. 206) and 'a complex pattern of services which differ for each Sunday of the month' (Russell, 1993, p. 172). The extent of this complexity has been well documented in the two studies reported by Francis (1985, 1996). But, in terms of numbers attending, what happens when there is that complex railway timetable? Do people travel? My role as priest in charge of Teme Valley South provided an opportunity to explore that question.

Method

Jenkins (2008) considers the role of the priest as a social anthropologist. He describes the priestly role as a 'participant observer' and someone who '*pays attention*' (italics in the original) (p. 93) to what is seen and then reflects against a theoretical framework. As priest-in-charge of Teme Valley South I had to opportunity to pay attention to patterns of churchgoing in those villages and to listen to churchgoers' stories of their encounters with God.

The ecclesiastical Parish of Teme Valley South is in the west of Worcestershire and is part of the Church of England Diocese of Worcester. It is made up of seven villages: Kyre, Stoke Bliss, Hanley William, Hanley Childe ('The Hanleys'), Eastham, Stanford, and Rochford. It has seven places of worship, including five parish churches and two chapels of ease (though the difference between a parish church and a chapel of ease is not always readily apparent). There are no places of Christian worship of denominations other than the Church of England and none of other faiths. The aggregate population of just 1204 people according to the 2011 census is small and the villages are de-nucleated settlements largely dependent on agriculture. There is a significant number of retired residents. There is also a number of people who commute to work elsewhere. There are few facilities: two pubs, two farm shops, a café, and five village halls. There is no school, post office, library or health centre. There is an occasional community bus run by volunteers from the local market town.

The small village populations are reflected in small church congregations and small numbers. Knowing who everyone is, provided the opportunity to observe who attended which services from which village. For four years, from July 2011 to July 2015 attendances at each of the services in the group were recorded, including where worshippers had travelled from.

Results

A typical entry for one Sunday would be as [Table 1](#). So from this entry we see that there were ten people at the 8.30 communion service at Hanley William, with eight of those ten being from the Hanleys and two from Stanford. There were fifteen people at Rochford's ten o'clock service, nine being from Rochford, three from neighbouring Eastham and three from out of the area. The three o'clock afternoon service at Stanford had three from Stanford and one from out of the area. However, a one off 'snap shot' of 23 June 2013 tells us very little. Four years of data compiled together tells us much of significance.

First, the data demonstrate that the number of services on a Sunday has no significant effect on the size of the congregation. There were Sundays when there were one, two, three, four and five services on the same day. The churchwarden quoted at the outset asserted that having one service rather than two would result in an increased size of congregation. The data from Teme Valley shows that, in Teme Valley at least, that assertion is not true. [Table 2](#) gives the figures. There was only one five service Sunday during the period of data collection and it was Easter Sunday, so it has been omitted from the analysis as atypical. The data included in the table was subject to an ANOVA test and the findings are significant at $p < .05$. We clearly see that fewer services on a Sunday were not followed by larger congregations at the service that remained. We also see that more services are associated with higher overall attendances.

Second, the data demonstrate that, when there is a service in a village church, most people attending the service were from the village in which the service is held. [Table 3](#) shows the percentage of the congregation that comes from the village in which the service was held. At all the services most of the congregation were from the village where the service was held. There were a few people from other villages, but not large numbers.

Moreover, the data demonstrate that the corollary of this finding is also true. If most people in church were from the village in which the service was held, then people were more likely to attend worship if there was a service in their church than if there was not. [Table 4](#) gives the percentage of residents who were at church when there was a service in their church and the percentage who travelled elsewhere when there was not. From this we see that the people who live in Rochford were best at going to church when there was a service in Rochford, and worst at travelling when there was not. Stoke Bliss and Kyre residents were best at travelling, but worst at attending their own church. But in every case, people were more likely to attend worship when there was a service in their church and less likely to attend when there was not. The data describes people's behaviour, but does not explain it. For that careful listening to churchgoers (more *paying attention*) was needed. What was heard through that listening were

Table 1. Service attendance on 23 June 2013.

Service Time	Location	Attendees from							
		K	SB	H	E	ST	R	O	T
8.30	Hanley William	0	0	8	0	2	0	0	10
10.00	Rochford	0	0	0	3	0	9	3	15
15.00	Stanford	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	4

Note: K = Kyre, SB = Stoke Bliss, H = Hanleys, E = Eastham, ST = Stanford, R = Rochford, O = Out of Area, T = Total.

Table 2. Total attendance and congregation size by number of services.

	Number of services			
	1	2	3	4
Total attendance at all services	14	26	39	61
Average attendance at each service	14	13	13	15

Table 3. Percentage of attenders from village where the service is held.

Time of service	Village of service						
	SB	K	H	E	ST	R	T
Early morning (8.30)	73	83	55	63			69
Mid-morning	73	55	68	66	61	67	65
Afternoon or evening			63		79	80	74

Note: K = Kyre, SB = Stoke Bliss, H = Hanleys, E = Eastham, ST = Stanford, R = Rochford, T = Total.

Table 4. Percentage of residents in church by location of service.

	Percentage of residents attending church				
	E	SB & K	R	ST	H
Service in local church	3.8	2.5	6.0	4.9	0.5
No service in local church	0.6	0.9	0.2	2.9	0.5

Note: K = Kyre, SB = Stoke Bliss, H = Hanleys, E = Eastham, ST = Stanford, R = Rochford.

stories of how people have encountered God in particular places and at work in particular communities.

Conclusion

The observation that most of the time most people do not travel to attend church services in other communities and mostly worship in their own church will not be a surprise to anyone who has had experience of rural church life. Each congregation wants the place/community where its members have encountered God to be its own expression of Christian life. But the naïve optimism of the churchwarden at the outset is common, not least among people planning pastoral reorganisation. On the basis of the behaviour that is seen in this study, any church strategy that fails to recognise the attachment that worshippers have to their own church (and to its place and to its community) is likely to encounter difficulties.

There are implications for clergy and laity. If each and every church is to be the expression of Christian life, then it follows that it will need to be each and every *church* that is that expression. It cannot be the cleric who is that expression in each place and community. Even if that were desirable, s/he would be in too many places for that to happen effectively. Consequently clergy cannot and should not aspire to the role as it was half a century ago when the village parson was the person around whom community, church and village life revolved.

With reduced numbers of clergy there is a temptation to ‘retreat’ into a holy huddle of keen Christians made up of that small proportion of people who do travel to attend services elsewhere. But that would un-church the larger proportion of people who in this

study make up the larger part of the congregations. Instead clergy need to be the people who are the enablers of others and who share in the ministry of the whole people of God in each place, resourcing all church members to discover their own gifts and callings. There is nothing new in this as a plethora of church reports have called for this over decades. What the findings show is the importance of the Church implementing those reports and embracing collaborative local working rather than describing it as ‘not possible’, ‘an ideal to work towards’ and ‘difficult to achieve’.

The implications for laity are the corollary. Laity must not see themselves as the helpers of the clergy, but rather partners with the clergy, working together in each place and community as an expression of the life of the local church.

It could be argued that Teme Valley South churches may be atypical and that, were the research to be repeated elsewhere, different results would be seen; but it is more likely that the churches of Teme Valley South have much in common with other churches. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, this study challenges the Church to put a renewed emphasis on valuing the local church.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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