

Address to Devon Churches Rural Forum 2018 Conference
Re-imagining Rural Ministry: Moving towards new structures

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Nobody likes change! But it is necessary. There are all the jokes about how many Christians it takes to change a light bulb but I particularly like the comment of a former Baptist colleague who said that Baptists don't like change – especially on the collection plate!

The rural church seems to like change even less than the rest of humanity and, given the threats and anxieties that many of our churches face today, it is hardly surprising that this is so. And yet - and yet - we are living through a time of great change. I'm not telling you anything new but I remind you that my parents' generation – some of whom were born when running water and electricity were unheard of inside the home - my parents' generation has lived through the greatest period of change we have ever know - from the outhouse to the tablet. And yet, the Church has not changed nearly as much.

Going back to the collection plate - I was somewhat surprised when I was told that passing the plate in church is a relatively new twentieth-century feature of our life. So, when I tried to encourage congregations to donate to church funds by Banker's Standing Order, people objected because what would they do when the plate was handed around. The reply - of course - is that we stop passing the plate around - and the response I got to that would make you think that passing a collection plate was something that Jesus and the disciples did at the end of the Passover Meal!

So - we need to change - but we don't really want to. And surely, here is the nub of the issue before us today. The rural church is vital to their local community - I trust that I didn't need to justify that statement in this context. > The rural church is often the hub of its local community and though it is vital to community it is often reluctant to change. > So, is there anything we can do to increase the pace of engagement with the world in which the church is placed?

And, what is it that makes the rural church reluctant to change? Some possible answers:

1. In a world of great uncertainty, people often feel that they would like something to be sure and certain and that they'd like the church to be that central pillar of their living.
2. The church is getting older and - as we age - we tend to reinforce our own preferences and lose any inhibitions or concern for the needs of others
3. The church is getting smaller and rather than making us ask what needs to change so that the church will grow, we turn in on ourselves and decide that we'll keep things as they are for those who will stay faithful - rather than risk losing the faithful by making changes that may - or may not - attract others.
4. Church structures make change very difficult to manage. Methodism is a fairly democratic organisation and we can take years to agree on ways forward, whether that be at the level local church or nationally. Also, the behaviours of powerful individuals who often have loud voices and personal preferences are not challenged because the control they are able to exercise undermines the views and ideas of others.

There are many other reasons that you may want to add, particularly when we move into small groups. For we need to do our diagnosis well before we begin to prescribe the remedies we need. And we need to mitigate the stumbling blocks if we are going to make any kind of progress.

I am deeply committed to the rural church. It is my life and my ministry. I want the rural church to thrive but we will fail if we do not notice two things:

1. The rural church does not want to be dumbed-down or treated differently because it is the rural church. All aspects of church life are as important in rural contexts as they are anywhere else. Therefore, the rural church does not want to short changed when it comes to worship, pastoral care, ministerial support or proposals for innovation. Rural churches are as theologically astute, prayerfully engaged and faithfully committed as people in suburban, urban or city settings. And they

are usually more connected to their context and more embedded in the community than any other type of church.

2. A rural church isn't necessarily a small church. It often is - but it isn't always and we should not fall into the trap of thinking only of the small. But - even if we do - we have to remember that there are things about smaller churches that give them the edge over the larger one. For instance, every worshipper is engaged and relates to the others; everyone is respected and considered when decisions have to be made and there is a recognition that the mission and ministry of a church belongs to everyone - not just the few. And I finish - for now - with this idea that was helpfully shared with me by one of our Rural Officers..... 'a tangerine is not a failed orange!' It looks like an orange but it is smaller. It often peels more easily than an orange but the essential segments are the same in number. So, the smaller church and the rural church - sometimes they are the same, sometimes they aren't - the rural church needs to be recognised for its differences and its strengths. And if we can focus on those rather than their problems and their weaknesses, we will get a long way indeed.

And, the rural church may be a tangerine but that doesn't mean that it's failed!