

Re-imagining Rural Ministry: Moving Towards New Structures

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The rural church is often described as a problem, a millstone hanging round the neck of its go-ahead suburban cousin but, as the reports *Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church* (2015), and *Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in rural multi-church groups* (2017) testify, the rural church is one of the great success stories of the Church of England. Today as we come together from our different traditions and contexts, I believe there are things that we can all learn from one another as together we seek to release the mission energies of God's church.

I can only speak from an Anglican viewpoint, but at the outset I would caution lumping all rural churches under the same umbrella. They are more diverse than many imagine: 'rural' is a slippery word. Some congregations like to describe themselves as rural, but in reality they are suburban in outlook. Parishioners claim to live in a village, except the majority of them are newcomers and the 'village' is a dormitory of commuters who moan the moment a local farmer drops manure at the bottom of their immaculate driveway.

In the Diocese of Exeter we have 614 churches many of which, far from being quasi suburban, are better described as 'remote rural'. Typically, the same families have tilled the land for generations, and there are few B roads, let alone A roads. I remember in my early days as Bishop of Exeter putting in a new vicar into Bradworthy, an hour and 40 minutes by car from Exeter right up on the Cornish border. After the service one of the parishioners accosted me at the bun fight: 'Here,' he said, 'are you the Bishop of Exeter? What are you doing up here?' as if I were some sort of interloper or foreign agent. When I explained to him that the Diocese of Exeter embraced all of Devon, even Bradworthy, he said, 'I've never been to Exeter. What's it like? I gather it's a strange place.' If you want a definition of 'remote rural' there you have it.

Unsurprisingly, such communities often spawn congregations which can be resistant to change, whether it's the introduction of new-fangled services or pastoral reorganisation. Most traditional villagers presume that they belong to the church even if they do not attend it regularly which is why initiatives such as 'Back to Church Sunday' puzzle them because they didn't know they had left the church in the first place.

Home groups and Alpha Courses sometimes founder, not for any theological reason, but because for the most part traditional villagers don't like going into one another's houses much. They know one another's business only too well and value their privacy. A minister needs to find other ways of building Christian community. Inviting everyone to sit in the front three rows of your otherwise empty village church is likely to constitute the end of a promising incumbency.

Rural congregations are typically small. Unlike suburban congregations which tend to have a modest pool of capable people, the talent pool in rural congregations is invariably small. Rural clergy have little choice but to work with whom they've got, including some individuals who may be difficult and who in other contexts they would not choose to put into positions of leadership. Clergy can find themselves 'having to work round some people' as opposed to 'working with people'.

Our rural congregations also often include Christians from other denominations. The closure of some chapels, be they Methodist, Baptist, URC, or Brethren, or the fact that the nearest Roman Catholic church is 25 miles away, has generated an unexpected bonus for the Church of England in swelling our modest congregations. Their presence is giving new meaning to Anglican comprehensiveness.

In my experience villagers love their parish church, even if they don't worship in it. I've given up trying to close rural churches. The moment parishioners sniff that the bishop is thinking of closing them down I get sheaves of letters. And this is understandable. Having lost the village shop, the post office, the pub and the village school, often the only community building left in some rural areas is the parish church. We could talk endlessly about the burden and the blessing of our buildings, but the fact is we have to make our buildings fit for the 21st century as best we can and make them work for their communities. In the Diocese of Exeter we have set up a 'Growing the Rural Church Project' under the leadership of Marian Carson which is endeavouring to help communities do just that. Use your church or lose it: that's the bottom line.

As far as worship is concerned, the reduction in the number of stipendiary clergy across the Church of England is creating both a headache and an opportunity. Another Anglican report published last year entitled, 'Setting God's people free,' beats the drum for lay leadership and ministry. Amen to both things. In this diocese we have appointed a new lay discipleship project leader whom we've pinched from the Methodist Church, as a result of which Graham didn't talk to me for a week. I think he's forgiven me.

We need a broader suite of commissioned lay ministers, and we need to train up more and better lay leaders of worship for our rural parishes. I have a fantasy that it would be wonderful if every church in Devon could have an act of worship on Sunday, even if it were only 20 minutes long. Anglicans don't mind getting in their cars and driving to the nearest supermarket or to the doctor's surgery, but are loathe to travel to the church in the next door village when there's no service in their own. And of course, this further erodes the culture of church-going which, since the deregulation of Sundays, is increasingly fragile. I simply don't know how we challenge this mind-set. Answers on a postcard to the Bishop of Exeter please.

Regularity in worship matters. We are a liturgical church, and the content and the quality of the worship we offer matters. Lowest common denominator worship does not advance the kingdom of God. Equally we need to reach new people in new ways which is where Fresh Expressions of church come in. In my experience the Church of England will die of good taste. But this does not equate to 'anything goes'.

Sometimes in our desperation to engage with the wider community we can lose the plot and end up confusing and alienating the fringe by gimmickry. My colleague Nick McKinnel, the Bishop of Plymouth and

sometime Vicar of Hatherleigh characterises rural church as 'Old Testament religion'. The farming community absolutely gets the seasons and the value of Plough Sunday, rogationtide and harvest festivals.

What it doesn't quite get is the incarnation. The missional challenge is to make Jesus Christ known and to make connections between Christ and everything they feel intuitively in their bones about the created order.

If we are a liturgical church, we are also an episcopal church. We have canons that bind me as much as my clergy. There are boundaries, but there is also flexibility, in fact much more flexibility than many people imagine. So I would say to the Anglicans among you, go and talk to your archdeacon or Suffragan bishop. We're on your side.

When I visit rural communities I invariably come away energised and hugely encouraged. To return to Bradworthy when I put their new vicar in, I encountered a flourishing group of villages complete with its own Baroque Choir singing away, and the local branch of the NFU staging Aladdin in the village hall. Phil Norrey, the Chief Executive of Devon County Council, tells me that the strength of such rural communities lies in their capacity for self-generation. They don't expect to be entertained; so they make their own entertainment. They don't expect hand-outs because they are not on anyone's political radar. So they look out for

one another. My worry is not the rural church, but the urban church: how can we release the same capacity for self-generation in inner city communities which have become weakened by a culture of dependency? The rural church has things to teach the urban church.

Let me give you another example. When I preached at Plough Sunday in Winkleigh in January I talked to no less than five dairy farmers all of whom bemoaned the collapse of the milk price. It is indeed a scandal that a bottle of sparkling mineral water costs more than a bottle of milk. But there was no self-pity in their talk. They were all pretty sanguine about it. What is the secret of their resilience? Because we need to capitalise upon it in the life of the church.

Part of the answer lies in their grit. The farmers persevere, knowing that eventually the tide will turn. But part of the answer also lies in their innate entrepreneurial ability to adapt. The theory of evolution as developed by Charles Darwin was not survival of the fittest. We often get Darwin wrong. What Darwin discovered was that the species that survives is the species that is the most adaptable. And the same is true of communities and churches.

If the church in our rural areas is to grow and flourish, then we need not only to toughen up and be resilient, but to encourage a spirit of entrepreneurship. We need to adapt to a changing landscape, both locally at grass roots and organisationally in our church structures. In short, we need to take risks for God.

Finally, a word about the age profile of the rural church. In company with the rest of the shire counties, the age profile of the church in Devon is high and getting higher. According to the government projections published in 2011, the population of Devon is set to increase by around 20% over the next fifteen years, but within that there is a hidden time-bomb. Every age group is set to remain roughly stable except those over the age of 70 which is predicted to rise by a staggering 54%. Devon has always been a haven for the retired, but the huge increase in older people in our villages will be a massive challenge for the NHS more than anything else. But it is also an opportunity. How are we going to engage with this growing constituency? How are we going to evangelise them?

As Christians we need to challenge the narrative that views older people as a burden, and speak the language of gift. Yes, we need to engage more imaginatively with the children in our villages, and here I would put

in a plea for ecumenical cooperation in dove-tailing our schools more effectively into our mission strategy. After all, there are more children in our schools than in our Sunday Schools. When are we going to wake up to this fact? We need to go to them and not keep expecting them to come to us. But let's also affirm and celebrate the presence of older people in our rural churches. They have a honed wisdom that brings ballast to our communities.

As far as children and young people are concerned, work with them will come and go. Sometimes, thanks to the presence of a couple of young families in an area, a parish is able to gather a group of children and nurture them to young adulthood. But then the children leave school and home, and the group disperses. We shouldn't feel a failure because the work has stopped. These things go in waves.

In the Diocese of Exeter with our commitment to encourage parishes into mission communities we want to release individual parishes from feeling that they have to be everything and do everything. But working together across the *piste*, and I may add working ecumenically, we hope that they will cover all the bases and that somewhere in the locality there

will be children's work going on which needs to be supported and resourced.

In conclusion let me simply say that in my experience mission and ministry in the countryside works best when churches cooperate, rather than compete. What I hope will emerge from our conference today is a vision and a willingness to work in partnership in new and imaginative ways for the sake of the kingdom of God.

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