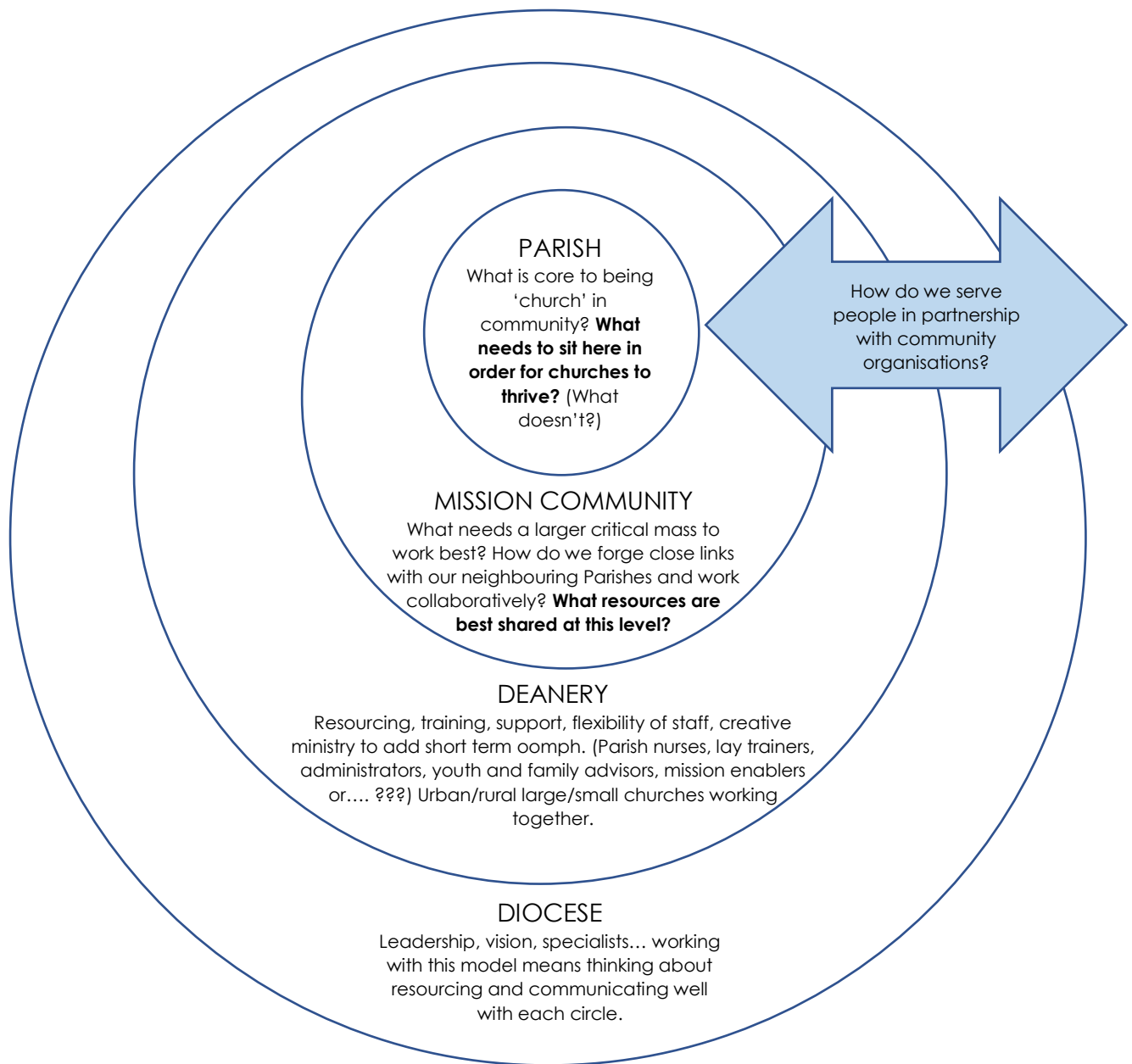


Thinking about rural ministry – Rev'd Rosie Austin – Devon Churches Rural Forum Conference 2018

A CIRCLES (not TRIANGLES!) model:



We sometimes (perhaps) think of church as a triangle, with a hierarchical structure and clergy sitting at the top for each church community. It's not what it *should* be like, but it is what it often *feels* like. In multi-parish ministry, we find this model and people within it increasingly stretched, and a clerical culture which does not encourage the baptised people of God to own their calling. This model suggests a circle as a basis for discussion about how we support and sustain 'church' – and as church how we witness to and serve our local communities.

Other questions to ask for each circle:

- **What makes a PARISH/MISSION COMMUNITY/DEANERY/DIOCESE and what is it for?**
- **What should sit here in order for churches and communities to thrive?**
- **Just as importantly... what doesn't?**
- **Who ministers here, and how can they be resourced?**

PARISH - The first, inner circle I have called PARISH. This could be a geographical parish but could also refer in urban contexts to a cell group, a smaller area of a town or network of people. PARISH is where relationship happens. In rural ministry there is a very strong sense of place defined with the wording and borders of 'parish' even outside of the church community. For the Church of England this rootedness to place and a commitment to 'be there' in each parish is a strength that cannot be easily dismissed, and a sign of God's presence even in the most isolated and forgotten of places.

This circle is not the church building or just the services (these are God given resources amongst others) and nor does it describe Christians from just one denomination. The people at the heart of this 'parish' circle are the people who live and work and care for this place and are rooted in it; people of faith called by God to be there as his people for his people.

These people may have a huge variety of world and work experience, but not necessarily relevant to the tasks which they are asked to perform in the church (churchwarden, treasurer, health and safety inspector, youth worker, pastoral carer, safeguarding officer, secretary, graphic designer, chair stacker, caterer, ...) Our Mission Action Plans should start here and talk about serving mission and growth within this central circle based on the different gifts and resources God has provided to each church and community. They might also consider what can be lifted from the shoulders of the valued lay people who minister here.

MISSION COMMUNITY - The next circle out is the one I will call 'Mission Community' because that is our reality within Exeter Diocese but could refer to other types of church groupings.

Some things seem to belong at parish level especially in our rural context– eg services for harvest, Christmas, Easter, pastoral care and other activities based on mission, service and community engagement. But there are many things which we in our Mission Community do together which we would really struggle to do individually. (eg Agape supper, youth discipleship, marriage preparation, service rotas...). A weekly Holy Communion in each parish is not possible, but will be celebrated somewhere within the Mission Community.

There is much to be gained by churches working together and building supportive relationships with each other. There is probably something to be said for the legal structures of the PCC being moved to this level. But it has to be done in a way that retains the integrity of the PARISH and does not increase the burden or double up the time commitment of the volunteers at the heart of the parishes.

Clergy, in a sense, sit at mission community level as prayerful leaders, enablers and encouragers of all those who minister in the parishes. And they also need to work across the borders into the circle I call 'deanery'. This is a big culture change.

DEANERY - This next outer circle I'll call 'deanery' – but again this is not necessarily deanery boundaries, which often feel a bit bizarre geographically. Other models such as 'minster' or 'resource church' are re-emerging in other Dioceses. It might also encompass a resource such as 'Mission Shed'.

There is deeper history to these deaneries which feels lost. When at our recent deanery synod meeting we asked small groups the question, "what is deanery synod for?", the response for many was that in reality it felt like a legal box-ticking exercise. When the agenda of the meetings is focussed on finances and legal structures, with perhaps a speaker tagged on at the end - is it any wonder?

But there is potential for this to be a richer resource. A resource for sharing ideas across Mission Community boundaries, where churches of other traditions and churches can share ideas of what they are doing to reach out to their communities in different ways. A place where local training can happen, with that critical mass of learners for bringing in experts. And a place of spiritual resourcing and theological reflection (for lay people and clergy) which echoes the ethos of ancient minster churches.

DIocese - This is where vision and culture is imagined and described. But this has to be communicated well to the smallest of central circles. And it must listen carefully and be responsive to the parishes. It exists to support PARISHES, MISSION COMMUNITIES and DEANERIES in mission, with the provision of specialist knowledge, training and other resources. It must take care of those who minister there by working locally whenever possible and taking care to not overburden fragile volunteers and PCCs.

CONCLUSION – I hope this helps as we consider healthy models for sustainable churches who pray, grow, and serve with joy.

Rosie