

Notes from Devon Churches Rural Forum Meeting

15th January 2018 Devon Young Farmers Club Centre, Cheriton Bishop

- 1 Archdeacon Mark opened the meeting with prayer
- 2 Apologies: Alison Ball, Paul Seaton-Burn, Simon Franklin, Michael Winter, Richard Yarwood, Jon Oliverio, Annie Jefferies, Jane Frost, Elaine Cook, Douglas Dettmer.
- 3 Present: Nick Creasy, Barry Dugmore, Sarah Cracknell, John Wibberley, Marian Carson, Stuart Wilson, Andy Jerrard, Martyn Goss, Adrian Brooks, Philip Wagstaff, Heather Sayle, David Ursell, Susanna Metz, Nickie Johnson, Penny Dobbin, Mark Butchers.

All present introduced themselves and the chair extended a particular welcome to those who have not attended a DCRF meeting before, namely Barry Dugmore, Mission Enabler for the Diocese of Exeter, Sarah Cracknell, recently appointed Project Officer for Growing the Rural Church Project and Nick Creasy, Operations Manager of Devon YFC.

- 4 The notes from the previous meeting held on November 16th 2017 were agreed.
- 5 Matters arising not appearing on the agenda below:
 - A meeting is planned in Holsworthy for 16th January to consider rural ministry there. The Holsworthy deanery/mission community may experiment with new models of rural ministry as a pilot for other areas.
 - A date for the conference on Models of Rural Ministry to be agreed (post meeting note – for diaries this will be on 28th July 2018).
 - Martyn will circulate information on local and national food initiatives for the website.
 - RSA Commission on Food, Farming and the Countryside – John has circulated some papers that could feed into this action, including a [summary prepared for Michael Gove July 2017](#). Michael Winter has also circulated some thoughts via email to Forum members.

6 Main Item – Focus on Farming – primary contributors Andy Jerrard, John Wibberley, David Ursell, Martyn Goss, Nick Creasy

This discussion does not represent an exhaustive overview of farming in Devon today, but covers some of the concerns and policy issues raised by members. For further information on any topic, or a wider overview, the organisations referenced by members will be helpful. Links to these have been collated on our DCRF website [here](#).

What follows is a summary of the discussion. A full report can be accessed [here](#).

Pastoral Concerns - Mental health issues, including depression and suicide, continue to affect farming families. Factors affecting farmers include:

- Loneliness and isolation, exacerbated by the loss of livestock markets as natural meeting places
- Continuing suffering of animals and farmers through TB
- Financial concerns
- Succession planning
- The increasing vegan movement

Some aspects of farm economics were discussed including:

- Specialist markets - some farmers have managed to move from selling at a loss to profit through moving into specialist markets, however whilst this is helpful for some, the challenge of viable mass food production remains.
- Global commodity price fluctuations, quite outside an individual's control, can sometimes have a greater influence on profitability than issues either under the farmer's control, or influences from national government policy.
- Farm workers as well as farmers themselves need to be considered. So many farmers are now working solo that the number of jobs available for farm workers has decreased considerably, reducing locally available work, a factor in rural sustainability.
- The costs of regulation can be high, both in the direct cost of systems and processes and time required for "paperwork".
- Brexit continues to be a cause of great uncertainty for farmers, and uncertainty for any business is difficult.

Four wider areas affecting the farming environment were discussed:

- **Post Brexit Farm Subsidies** - Public Money for Public Good. The Environment Secretary, Michael Gove has said that the CAP is flawed and that public money should be spent on public goods – for example increasing access to land, environmental actions etc. – however, we might ask "if producing food is not a public good then what is?!" Links to recent speeches and policy announcements are available [here](#).
- **Soil Matters** - soil erosion is one of the biggest issues facing the world. It has been widely reported that at the current rate of erosion the world has only 60 harvest left (from 2015) and no soil = no food. The "headwaters of the Exe" land management project was discussed as an example of what can be done. Again, further information and links are available [here](#).
- **Natural Capital** – Natural capital can be defined as the world's stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. The concern is that in using up these resources faster than they can be replenished we build up social, ecological and financial liabilities resulting in food poverty, reducing sustainability for

communities, population displacement and more. The work of Dieter Helm of Oxford University on “Natural Capital” underpins much government thinking. Further information available [here](#).

- **Food Poverty and Strategy** - Food Poverty – while farmers are unable to make a profit and producers are moving to niche markets, many people do not have access to good quality local food. Devon has a [Food Strategy](#) and we have an opportunity to feed into this via Martyn Goss.

Church Responses and Discussion

- John Wibberley spoke about a Christian approach to food and farming being to look at profit as a by-product of doing the right thing – such as caring for the soil. Right values lead to right vision – and without vision the people perish (Proverbs 29.18). From vision can develop new sustainable ventures.
- The church and the diocese of Exeter own a significant amount of farmland. Could we be thinking about how this land is to be used in terms of sustainable planting, planting forest, access to the countryside, helping people to reconnect to creation and impacting mental health?
- In terms of direct pastoral care, the FCN is always willing to support church based pastoral care groups to understand the needs of farming families, and to train people to become FCN volunteers themselves. We need to remember that many issues that concern farming families will be extremely confidential and sensitive and that specialist pastoral care may often be needed, often provided by someone who is not a near neighbour. The FCN also facilitates suicide prevention training for rural groups.
- Opportunities for farmers to meet naturally have decreased with the loss of several livestock markets. The churches have in the past facilitated setting up “farm groups”. What can be done to support meeting opportunities today?
- A wider, supportive framework is very valuable – with listening and getting to know first-hand the concerns of our farming community concerns a priority. Through listening various exciting initiatives can emerge through churches, communities and farming networks working together.
- There are various community food networks connecting suppliers, farmers and consumers including people living in food poverty. It would be helpful to collate information on the different networks in order to contribute to the overall food strategy for Devon. Further information on food, food networks and food poverty on the Diocese of Exeter Faith in Action website
- We spoke about possible things the DCRF itself could facilitate in support of our farming community, for example:
 - Farm visits for clergy and encouraging church pastoral care teams to receive specialist training from the FCN in pastoral care for their farming community.
 - Additional resourcing for harvest and other farming festivals.

- Exploring the idea of a “Devon Farming Business Strategy” bringing together people and organisations to look at the whole food and farming landscape including natural capital, food and farming product marketing.

We agreed to reflect on the write up from this meeting as to what this forum might be able to do – both personally – as individuals and churches – and at a more strategic level to take some of these issues forward and discuss at the next DCRF meeting in May.

7 **Rural Resource Churches – Barry Dugmore**

Barry Dugmore gave a very interesting and encouraging presentation on Rural Resource churches, having attended a national conference on the subject in November. You can access Barry’s full presentation [here](#).

Rural Resource churches, serving a number of other churches in an area, can help to bring together a critical mass for ministries such as youth and children’s work and pastoral care. The approach is based on a mixed economy of traditional church and fresh expressions working together, with small and large churches working together to each of their strengths.

Strategic Funding bids may be available for Resource churches on a diocesan basis.

Barry also referenced

- the National Rural Fresh Expressions Hub – link [here](#)
- a new rural church plant in Nottinghamshire called [The Potting Shed](#)
- a paper on resourcing churches in Leicester diocese
- information on a new proposed Rural Resource Church Learning Communities (these latter three can be found on the same linked document [here](#))

8 Sharing of any recent news, updates, concerns from members on rural issues

No additional items were raised.

9 Notices and Events

Members’ attention was drawn to our [“Workshops, Forums and Conferences”](#) page

10 AOB – there was none

11 Dates of next meetings: 9th May and 29th October. All 2018 meeting will take place at the Young Farmers Centre at Cheriton Bishop from 10 am to 12 noon.

12. The meeting closed with prayer at 12.15 pm.