

A Summary of thoughts, ideas and themes from the small groups' session at the DCRF Rural Worship Workshop held on October 12th 2019

Introduction

This workshop focused on “special occasion” worship and spirituality events – and particularly in reaching out to members of the community who are not already members of the regular congregation. Because of this, many of the practicalities, joys and issues surrounding regular, Sunday weekday prayer and worship were not discussed. Perhaps this could usefully be the subject of another workshop.

Billed as a Rural Worship Workshop, the day turned out to be about rural mission and ministry in a much wider sense - in making connections, building bridges between the sacred and the secular, meeting people in ways that are familiar to them, having fun, joining people together, building community – through the focus of worship, praise, thanksgiving, spirituality, shared celebration and sadness - and offering opportunities to raise awareness and pray about social justice and environmental concerns.

One of the things that unified the different ideas and experiences for me in the workshop, was the sense that through worship, prayer and spirituality events in and around our villages, people are being helped to see where God is already active in their midst – whether that be in farm, field or village – the sub-title of our workshop day – and in the day to day run of life.

The encouragement that emanated from the day was palpable. There is so much going on and so much enthusiasm and creativity in our rural parishes from lay people and ministers alike. People working together – within and without the church to celebrate the seasons, community life and give thanks and praise to God.

It is sometimes said that spirituality in the rural areas may be more Creation than Christ centred – and certainly living in the middle of such beautiful land and seascapes we are offered some particular resources – but we only need to think of the first words of John’s gospel to remember that Jesus – the Word – is in all things – and in Him all things have their being. We are lucky in the rural areas that we have His creation to open up for us a particular window on the Word.

In this summary, I have not tried to reproduce all the different ideas that flowed out of the different subject groups – these can be found both in the voice recordings of the facilitators reporting back, and in their written notes – and in the typed up ideas from the flip charts - but rather to try to draw together common themes and ideas that came out from all the groups using particular ideas as examples.

Finally – as was pointed out - we may plant the seeds but it is God who makes them grow. Prayer is the most important aspect of our work and so prayer around events themselves, prayer for our communities, parish prayer groups, prayer diaries etc. all help to underpin our work of worship, as well as being an intrinsic part of it.

What is special or distinct about rural worship?

Perhaps it is worth exploring this question before continuing – just what is it that makes rural worship special?

- Something that came through almost all the groups – sometimes intrinsically – sometimes overtly – is the importance of Nature - the seasons, the ability to be outside, close to nature, space to be, to see God everywhere in all his glory all the time – and the incredible resource this brings in keeping our worship earthed, in enabling worship and seasons to work in harmony, offering spaces for meditation, prayer walks, pilgrimages and outdoor social events (always weather permitting!).
- Our farms and farmers – producers of our food – with families and connections that underpin so much of our community life – help us to keep our worship close to reality especially at times of the main farming festivals but also for village social events and offering space for other events such as Ascension services on the hill.
- The church building and churchyards – highly visible and important to many if not most in the community. A building which may be familiar and dear to a high proportion of the population through the occasional offices or who are used to the quiet space it offers for daytime quiet and reflection. Also with over 700 churches (all denominations) in Devon – we offer a presence in almost every human community – and are sometimes the only communal building left.
- The nature and culture of our village communities is intrinsic to many of the worship, prayer and spirituality ideas shared today. We have villages where more people know each other because they inhabit the same geographical area, where multigenerational village events may be the norm, where word of mouth and local notices can be effective publicity, where a significant number of the population may be pre-disposed to communal activities. Communal activities can also help to integrate new people moving into a village with existing residents.
- Place – the concept of place is generally accepted to be of high importance in most aspects of rural mission and ministry - sometimes seen as a constraint when we see how congregations are reluctant to travel to neighbouring parishes for joint worship – but a blessing when it draws people together to come together in the place where they live in celebration or sadness.
- Venue – acts of worship and other events in all sorts of places in the community are very well accepted as “normal” especially for special occasions.
- Size – in regular worship often smaller congregations can facilitate different forms of worship, sometimes less formal - but the size of the wider population is also important. Sometimes the population of the whole village is the size of a medium to large congregation in a town church. It is therefore possible for the church leadership to have well developed relationships with a significant proportion of the general population – as well as the church family - and relationship as we know – underpins so much of our work.

Practicalities

- Consider – what is the key aim of the event or worship?
- Friendly welcome
- Music – instruments, CDs or unaccompanied singing – especially when outside?
- Sound – do you need a portable PA system?
- Advertising
 - About three months in advance reckoned to be about right
 - Village mags and news sheets
 - Church mags
 - Village notice boards
 - Website
 - Window displays in shops on harvest or Advent theme – for examples
 - Having a web site – in addition to A Church Near You vital for people to find out what is going on
 - Social Media
 - Use of hashtags which can help people not connected with the church align on something that may interest them
 - Or the old fashioned social media of the village shop and post office!
- Access, parking, transport, mobility concerns
- Clear and friendly instructions on what to do in worship – when to stand, sit, move ...
- Health and Safety, especially in outside venues - and Safeguarding – we need safe spaces for people
- Weather dependency / wet weather contingency plans
- What we call things – trendy – or what it says on the tin!
- Use of multimedia clips
- Visual aids such as ploughs and tractors really helpful – and lead into an activity and another dimension of interest
- Choice of language
- Timing - when is going to be best for farmers and families for example
- How to invite people
 - Personal invitation
 - Postcard through a letter box
 - Invitation to participate

Place and Venue

- Place in rural life is a really important concept.
 - In regular worship people prefer to worship in their own village rather than move around
 - Place for special services for the community also important – villagers want an event in their village
- A large number of events have been naturally held in venues other than the church.

- Farms can be a venue for farming services but so much more - work with the farmer to help with planning, risk assessment, insurance
- Village halls are great for social events and coffee mornings etc. and for some worship events such as Messy Church – also good to support each other’s organisations in a village
- Anywhere in the village when carrying out a “Blessing” or “Dedication” – for example – a memorial tree – a play area – a sports club pavilion ...
- In the orchard for blessing the orchards or at apple pressing time
- Being outside in nature is a whole category on its own – but particularly used for beating the bounds, anything to do with nature/environment, many spirituality events, special days such as Sea Sunday on the beach or by a harbour
- Suggestions to see how other community groups are using various spaces and what ideas this might bring
- Seeing the church out and about in places like the pub or a village dance – can be very encouraging for people – helps to break down barriers and misconceptions of what church people are like
- Agricultural Shows offer opportunities for church presence – prayer or worship – or hospitality
- Include the sea – both in terms of the harvest of the sea and all those whose livelihoods are connected with the sea
- Hold prayer/worship events where people already are for example – on the allotments where there is already a good community – bless the plots, pray for the people ... or at the reservoir where many doing walkers meet

“Doing things” and Movement in worship

Many groups stressed the advantages of practical “doing” in worship as a way of engaging people

- Always an extra joy when worship and events can be multi-generational and activity based worship makes this much easier
- Giving children tomato seeds in spring to grow tomatoes to make soup for the harvest supper
- Blanching and freezing the harvest produce to make soup for village events during the year
- Making bread with children for Lammas Day – a practical explanation and enacting of the day
- Incorporating harvest fun with a harvest festival – hay bale tosses – lawn mower races - where the whole village can get involved together for fellowship and celebration
- Adding a barn dance to a festival day or service
- People getting together to knit a nativity set and then having it appear in the crib service
- Have a farmer demonstrate some equipment
- Having people moving around
 - Especially a walking nativity – using different places in the village for different parts of the story, involving everyone who can be part of the procession, the pub landlord as the innkeeper, the shepherds as the shepherds, many wise men, real sheep ...
 - Ascension Day on a high hill
 - Pilgrimages – see below

- Prayer walks – see below
- Rogation – traditionally a time of walking around the parish – but could also be done by tractor trailer rides around if a long way or people are elderly – or a smaller walk

Worship Content

- Testimonies, discussion and interviews in services can be very powerful – and sometimes can be an easier route in for some people to hear the word than a straight forward sermon
- Use pre-filmed interviews with people in the community in services
- Ask a farmer to give a farming report – or gather one together in advance by ringing round the farmers to ask them how it's been – what concerns they have – what's going well
- Adapt hymn words to suit the particular occasion or place
- Remember the power of music – and the power of silence
- Consider whether singing needs to be accompanied at an outside event or whether people, can just sing

Nature

- Being outside – making the most of the beauty of nature and the countryside and coasts on our doorsteps.
- From one group discussion about how *“outside environment and nature can really lift the spirit”* and from another *“Our rural context gives us a wealth of different opportunities for “being church” (or “expressing spirituality”) in new and different ways outside the church buildings - whether you call these “Fresh Expressions” or merely “special outreach events””*
- Following the seasons – outdoor prayer walks and “noticing” – slowed down events for multi generations
- Wild church and forest church can be adapted to follow on from Messy Church
- Trees, clearings, shadow, light, buildings, animals, plants, fields, crops ... can all help to illustrate bible stories and help people to enter into them more fully
- If we want to celebrate or pray for our environment then the logical place to do this is outside – to celebrate bio-diversity in a wood – wild flowers in a meadow ...

Hospitality of Space

- Provide the hospitality of space for people to ask questions and explore their faith and spirituality in accessible ways
- Maybe engage in interfaith activities – see how much we hold in common – offer space for people of all faiths and none to come and experience God's presence and ask questions – perhaps outside/nature venues offer even more opportunities.

Hospitality of food

- Can't leave it out - Involve food! Brings people together, relationships develop in breaking bread together

Social Activities

- Perhaps most part of the "Blessing the Community" genre or worship
- Helping to address social isolation and loneliness
- Thank you evenings for all those in the village who support the church in so many ways (grass cutting, flowers, brass, cleaning, bell ringers, historians ...)
- Celebrations of village life, community activities, community groups – the good we see around us in worship and as social events

Pilgrimage and Prayer walks

- In a multi parish benefice making a pilgrimage trail around the churches
- If a very large patch making a pilgrimage in cars – beginning at different point but joining up at the end – cars badged with ribbons or similar
- Have badges to collect in the churches
- Have good quality leaflets, prayer cards etc. in the churches
- Have available food and drink for pilgrims – and those on walking holidays.
- Prayer walk where starting time and place advertised then walk led by those on the walk stopping at various places e.g. doctors surgery, pub, school ...
- Can be done in prayerful silence or prayerful fellowship taking in the features of the land
- Walking Easter vigil from the beach to the church

Symbols

- Use of crossover symbols and words
- Themes such as Light and Angels and words such as Blessing - have meaning both in sacred and secular worlds – though perhaps differently understood - can help people to meet on common ground

Social Justice and Environmental Concerns

- National Special Days can be used as one of our bridges to connect sacred and secular parts of our communities and also to further our churches' mission in serving our communities with joy – in helping to tackle social injustice, environmental issues and climate change, the challenges people face daily in rural areas and helping to build community.
- This may be a largely untapped source of significant potential for connecting with people who are concerned about something – and bringing a wholeness of prayer, theological thinking and spirituality to what otherwise may be a secular event.

- Awareness raising events around issues such as Modern Slavery, Mental Health, Environmental concerns – can be hosted by church – open for whole communities – incorporating prayer and / or worship as appropriate for the event
- These can be linked in with national special days e.g. National Mental Health Day, World Environmental Day, Freedom Sunday. In this way we can make use of national advertising and awareness – hence the use of “hashtags”.
- Significant action point from the day – we need to create a good list of Special Days that can be used by churches to plan events. This could be accompanied by ideas on how to connect the special days and the churches work and help build community and could lead into both a prayer diary and our “Calendar of Worship Opportunities”.

Schools

- Open the Book – is universally considered to be an amazing resource for churches and schools. It offers an act of worship with our children, use of drama and bible stories, gives confidence to those who lead and promotes multi-generational relationships as it helps young and old to know each other within a community, and tells the stories of Jesus.
- Where a school is closed – how do we meet with our children in a village?

Be Realistic

- About what can actually be achieved
- About whether an event should run every single year!
- About events that can be done with a minimum of preparation – e.g. the walking nativity referred to above
- The decreasing number of clergy available even for regular worship
- How to motivate and encourage people to lead worship and events and to develop from leading a lay led Sunday morning service where needs must to really enjoying and being enthusiastic about leading worship

And in conclusion - let's celebrate and thank God

... for the great diversity, enthusiasm and creativity that is happening right now in so many of our wonderful rural parishes. When we get downhearted with some of the struggles of rural mission and ministry, this day has shown how special rural worship is and can be – what amazing resources we have in our buildings, in nature and in our people. How good God is in bringing new life in so many ways. What a few people with a great idea and prayer can achieve. How many people in our communities are already engaging in the worshipping life of our churches - but just perhaps not on a Sunday. It has been suggested in other fora that perhaps a series of “specials” is one of the ways forward in rural worship – we need our regular worship to sustain and support us in our personal journeys of faith and to develop the life of the church – but perhaps today has given us something to think about the balance of regular and “special” community based worship.