**Devon Churches Rural Forum**

**Review 2016 to 2021 and the way forward 2022 and beyond**

**History**

* The DCRF derived from a small ecumenical group that used to meet with the Exeter Diocesan Rural Officer and continued to meet when RO retired and was not replaced
* In 2016 it organised a rural conference out of which came a number of strands of work that people felt were important.
* These were then formalised and the DCRF as we know it today began to emerge.
* It has since grown organically with new members joining.

**Work Strands**

The identified work strands were:

* Pastoral Care for farmers and livestock market chaplaincy
* Keeping abreast of farming issues in Devon
* Identifying needs and developing training opportunities for rural ministry
* Exploring and reflecting theologically on models of rural ministry
* Monitoring and responding to rural social and economic issues and concern
* Communication and Resources
* Environmental issues

Rural Advocacy, in in terms of being a source of information on rural issues, advocating for rural areas within the structures of society, and keeping the positive aspects and the needs of rural mission and ministry to the fore within discussions in our wider church structures, was initially discussed, but did not become a formal work strand. However rural advocacy has become a natural part of our work.

**Under these stands our work has included:**

**Farming support and awareness raising includes:**

* Keeping our churches updated with regular farming briefings – especially for harvest time and other key farming festival times
* Presentations at meetings from academics and NFU and input from farming members
* Update on current farming issues at each meeting
* Encouraging churches to undertake specialist pastoral training from FCN and supporting and promoting the work of the FCN

* Farm visit programme led by Danny Semorad to help people understand both the business of farming and current issues and thus be able to support their local farmers better
* Developing a partnership approach between the FCN, MU and WI to support rural women

**Training for Rural Ministry**

* This is one of the less well-developed of our work strands – possibly because those with particular expertise in ministerial training, who were early members of the Forum, moved on from their day jobs and we haven’t really been able to pick this up again yet.
* We have done some work on developing a proposal to provide placements for ordinands in a rural setting, using the gifts and talents of all the Forum members, depending on the interests of the ordinands. We have discussed preparing material/holding a supper evening with the Forum to enthuse ordinands about rural ministry and encourage them to look further. This has been on hold due to Covid, but we hope to pick this up once again with the new Principal of SWMTC – our previous chair the Ven Mark Butchers.
* We have promoted the work and resources of the Arthur Rank Centre.

**Models for Rural Ministry**

* We devoted the main item at our November 2017 meeting to a discussion on different models of rural ministry from around the UK and the world based on the knowledge, research and experience from members.
* This led to our July 2018 conference – [Re-imaging Rural Ministry](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/resources-for-churches/rural-ministry-and-mission-news-and-research/dcrf-2018-conference-reimagining-rural-ministry-moving-towards-new-structures-9313.php) - and all the resources that derived from this
* The main follow up work to the conference resulted in what has been further developed by Growing the Rural Church into the [“Lightening the Load”](https://www.growingtheruralchurch.org/lightening-the-load/) five session toolkit for rural churches. This includes an extended introduction celebrating rural life, mission and ministry.
* Our Rural Worship Workshop held in October 2019 [“A Year of Rural Worship: God in Farm, Field and Village”](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/resources-for-churches/liturgies-and-prayers-for-rural-communities/dcrf-rural-worship-workshop-12th-october-2019-outputs/) effectively described a model of rural mission based on specialist rural worship often involving a high proportion of the wider community. A calendar of rural worship (still under development) will help take this concept further.
* We also make national reports – from churches and research centres - available via our website and link with the national rural officers network and Arthur Rank Centre

**Rural Social and Economic work**

* Main items at meetings have included (all in a rural context):  
  + Loneliness and Social Isolation
  + Modern Slavery
  + Dementia and mental health
  + Rural Crime
  + The Levelling Up agenda (especially affordable housing and rural health inequalities)
* As a result of these discussions we:  
  + Developed a database of church based community activities (first released February 2019) such as lunch clubs, coffee mornings and craft afternoons, which was shared with partners, social prescribers and community connectors to enable connections to be made with those who may be lonely or socially isolated. This was widely welcomed by secular partner agencies and those involved in social prescribing – but it proved very difficult to extract information from the churches and the database has not been recently updated.
  + Promoted the practical work of the Clewer initiative such as the Farm Welfare App and encouraged churches to partake of training offered locally on the subject.
  + Shared resources on dementia and mental health
  + Shared information about rural crime affecting churches in particular
  + Are currently working out how we can collect case studies on issues such as affordable housing, access to health and social care, access to transport and employment opportunities etc. to feed into those who can influence policy
* A related project – Barnstaple Archdeaconry Church and Community Research Project – produced a comprehensive report covering many social and economic issues in north Devon and Torridge – but applicable more widely to our rural areas – with thoughts on how the churches can respond to these. Report available [here](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/rural-issues/about-rural-devon/).
* We also:  
  + are very pleased to have Devon Communities Together represented on the DCRF who are able to offer both resources and expertise and training on a huge range of rural social issues
  + engage in ongoing networking with the other agencies – including northern Devon networking group, Mental Health Round Table, Devon Strategic Partnership conferences etc.
  + have recently joined the Rural Services Network and members have been able to attend various seminars on rural social issues with people from across the country.
  + Add [relevant information and resources on many social issues](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/rural-issues/) to our website and inform churches through our newsletters to enable them to help people in their communities.
  + Members of the DCRF also attend meetings, conferences and seminars on particular subjects and are able to report back to the wider DCRF.

**Communication and Resources**

Mainly centre on our website and newsletters

* [Newsletters](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/devon-churches-rural-forum/newsletters/) – aim to send 2 per year covering the items discussed at our main meetings and how churches can respond, a focus on farming, news of events and conferences, sometimes book reviews, reports from our farm visits and more.
* [Additional farming briefings](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/farming/farming-reports/) are also sent – particularly for harvest
* Our newsletter distribution list covers around 100 people – all DCRF members are automatically included – other people have been added as a result of conferences etc. *It would be really good if members could promote the newsletter and encourage more people from a wider range of churches and organisations to sign up.*
* Our [website](https://devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk) is wide in scope.
  + It is used to make available all the proceedings, resources and links to further information from our meetings and to give members access to agendas and background papers before meetings
  + Has extensive sections covering all our work strands which offer access to research, reports, media articles, links to other organisations
  + Has a What’s On section for any relevant events, conferences – *but this is dependent on people sending in items to be included.*
  + *The website does contain some out of date information which could do with cleaning up – but generally is kept up to date.*

**Environmental issues**

* There are already well developed environmental groups and structures in the county, and we have not sought to replicate these.
* In February 2021 our main item focused on achieving net zero in a rural context
* We have often discussed environmental issues when considering farming matters
* We have promoted various events such as Caring for God’s Acre
* Through our Calendar of Rural Worship (under construction) we will be highlighting environmental themes that can be celebrated and used as a focus for worship – particularly worship outside the church building in nature.

**How we have worked**

* Our work is shaped by the skills, talents and interests of our members.   
  + The Forum is blessed with a wonderfully diverse range of members with expertise in so many different aspects of rural life, work and ministry.
  + Though other experts are sometimes asked to speak we rely primarily on our members for expertise and experience in the different areas of our work.
* Our practical work has been largely through “task groups”:  
  + In September 2016 our chair said “We have discussed before the concept of the Rural Forum being the place where rural work is shared and discussed in an overall sense but that most work will be enacted by various task groups – some already active – some which may be formed.”
  + For example – the FCN are the experts in pastoral care for farmers, as is Andy Jerrard in his various roles both as Methodist Agricultural Support worker and market chaplaincy co-ordinator. The forum therefore supports the FCN/Andy in their work, and encourages churches to seek their support for specialist training and to act as volunteers.
  + When new work is identified – for example to planning and delivery of the 2019 Rural Worship Workshop – it is entrusted to a task group of Forum members.
* The nature of our work is fairly equally shared between   
  + awareness raising - sharing knowledge and insight on a particular subject and generating ideas for how the church can respond
  + active projects such as organising training days and conferences, the farm visit programme, the community activity database (see below) etc.
  + providing additional resources via our website
* Our meetings have evolved over the years – you can see a summary of the items discussed in the Appendix to this paper.  
  + Initially focus on updates during the meeting from people working in each of the “work strand” areas
  + Moved to more written updates with the introduction of “main items” for the agenda – for reasons of time
  + *May we have lost something by not hearing directly from the people involved in work on the ground? Or should we have a rotating agenda item so that we do hear more frequently from different members about their work, whilst not trying to cover everything each time?*
  + *Related to this – we have reduced time for people to introduce themselves at the beginning of meetings – to share what they are interested and where their experience lies – this can be very valuable in developing relationships, helping people to get to know each other and knowing who to go to for particular expertise.*
  + We always ask the question each time we discuss a main item – so what can we do about this? What action can we as churches take?
  + With zoom, meetings have moved more towards a speaker/discussion format, rather than a working discussion – but that is partly the nature of zoom and we are very grateful we have been able to carry on at all. Zoom has also allowed people who might not have been able to attend in person to join in. The new hybrid meeting style from November 2021 will hopefully combine the best of both worlds.
  + ***What do people think about our regular meetings? What is most valuable? How would you like to see the time used – input/discussion/sharing/response?***

**Membership**

* Membership comprises people from church, community, farming, academic and public service agencies – all who have an interest in rural life and wellbeing – including:
  + Members of individual churches – mainly Church of England and Methodist but open to all- and mainly clergy/lay ministers/church wardens
  + People working for wider church institutions at diocesan, district and national level
  + Farmers
  + Academics particularly in the field of agriculture and rural social affairs
  + Agencies and organisations with an interest and responsibility for our rural life including:
    - Mothers’ Union
    - Women’s Institute
    - Farming Community Network
    - Devon Communities Together
    - Devon and Cornwall Police
    - The Arthur Rank Centre (supporting rural churches nationally)
    - Devon Historic Churches
    - Growing the Rural Church Project
    - Transforming Plymouth (for links with Clewer and Modern Slavery especially)
* The ecumenical nature of the group is really important. *There is a well-developed ecumenical structure in Devon through Churches Together – but it would be good to devote some more time to sharing ideas for fruitful working on the ground.*
* Membership has expanded considerably over the past few years. There are currently Forum 53 people on the email group list. The largest number ever present in one go (excluding conferences) is around 24. Whilst some people attend most meetings, others join for those meetings where the main item is perhaps of particular interest. The room where we usually hold our meetings accommodates up to 25 and this is a good number for constructive and engaged discussions we find.
* It has been said that one of the positives of the Forum is that it doesn’t feel too “churchy”. This helps to enable a wide range of people to take part.
* We ask anyone interested in joining the forum to contact either the secretary or the chair but we have never refused anyone who wanted to join us. Pretty well all the members are Christians – including the police reps – but this is not a requirement – though we do begin and end with a prayer always and people know that this is a group organised by the churches when they join.

**General Organisational Information**

* Always ecumenical but “sponsored” by the Diocese of Exeter who support the group financially and with leadership
* By agreement, DCRF chaired by the senior staff member with the diocesan rural portfolio. Currently chaired by Archdeacon of Totnes – to be replaced by newly appointed Archdeacon of Barnstaple from 2022.
* Secretary is currently Rev’d Penny Body – a retired priest with interest in rural and community ministry. *It would be good to widen the base of people working together to support the work of the Forum.* In the late summer of 2019 we had a couple of meetings of what may have become a “steering group” for the Forum as the secretary needed to step back from some work for health reasons. This may have continued – but Covid came along! A Steering Group could be very helpful in moving the work of the Forum along.
* One of the ways to describe the Forum is that we are a “corporate” Rural Officer. Where one person on their own (especially if part time) may struggle, but where, as a diverse group of people and interests working together, we are able to cover a wide range of rural issues including rural ministry, farming, rural community and social justice issues and more. Whilst this model means there is less of a focal point of a “go-to person” for rural issues, any questions directed via the secretary can usually be fielded in the appropriate direction.

**Funding**

* We have consciously tried not to be an organisation that needs constant funding as this can take a significant amount of time and effort to secure, and because it is possible that the focus of the work can become skewed towards that which secures grants rather than agreed priorities.
* We have huge resources of people and organisations within the Forum. Most members are stipended or have paid work representing their organisations and others are committed “volunteers”.
* Projects we have initiated have been resource intensive in terms of people’s time, they haven’t generally cost much money apart from the hire of facilities.
* The core costs of the Forum include:
  + when able to meet in person we hire a conference room at the Devon Young Farmers Rural Hub, which is located fairly centrally in the diocese. Meetings are 3 times a year and costs are around £330 annually.
  + Website – which is maintained by the secretary and hosted by “Church Edit” comes in around £215 per year
  + Secretary’s expenses – variable – primarily mileage – up to ~£350 annually when activity was high. In 2020 with largely zoom meetings around £60.
  + We budget for one person to attend the National Rural Officers Conference convened jointly by the Anglican and Methodist/URC national rural officers. This year the conference costs would be £250 plus travel costs.
  + The budget line is held by the Diocesan Church and Society Officer – Lydia Perris
  + For conferences and other events, other partners have also contributed to costs.
  + The Methodist church has offered to contribute to core costs as needed and this is held in reserve.
* In monetary terms the investment is multiplied many times with the generous gifts of time and talent from the members.
* Most people charge their expenses to their “day jobs” which are related to the work they are doing with the Forum. However, volunteer mileage expenses can be significant when needed because of the large distances involved in travelling around Devon, but can be organised if agreed in advance.

**Appendix - Summary of Content of Meetings 2016 to 2021**

* September 2016 - final planning for conference. Formalisation of current working areas and name. Discussion of how we work – ecumenism, task groups. Discussion of ongoing work.
* January 2017 – review of conference outcomes. Updates from people working in different areas.
* May 2017 – follow up of actions, Loneliness and Social Isolation – members of forum sharing information on local initiatives, projects, the concerns and issues themselves, working in partnership with others – out of which came community activities database project. Also presentation from Growing the rural church.
* November 2017 – first major discussion on models of rural ministry – members bringing experience and information from around the world
* January 2018 – focus on farming – member contributions – looking at pastoral care, farm economics, Brexit, soil, natural capital, food strategy with discussion and ideas as to how the churches can support farmers and farming. Also presentation on rural resource churches (models of ministry).
* May 2018 – planning for the models of rural ministry conference, agreed set of actions from focus on farming item, presentation from sally Farrant and discussion on dementia in rural areas and the church, care for the dying in rural areas discussion with input from members, update on community activities database
* October 2018 – feedback and discussion from conference on models of rural ministry and next steps to take, presentation from Stephen Derges on work of Germinate to support rural churches, follow up on actions from focus on farming, discussion on mental health, resources, work of FCN, work of Mental Health Round Table,
* February 2019 – follow up of many actions, discussion on possibilities for rural training of ordinands – task g set up, plans for rural worship workshop progressing, support needs for rural women, farm visit programme update, Devon Communities Together Community Unity Project presentation, Growing the rural church presentation,
* July 2019 – follow up of actions, presentation by Shaun Sawyer – Chief constable – reconnecting with rural communities with discussion and follow up actions agreed, project updates – rural worship workshops, training for ordinands, farm visits, presentation from Michael Winter on changing food culture and challenges and opportunities for agriculture, Mark Betson introducing himself and the work of the national rural officer.
* November 2019 – follow up on actions and project updates, feedback from rural worship workshop, farm visits, progress on developing “toolkit for rural ministry” following 2018 conference on models of rural ministry. Discussion on the administration of DCRF as secretary needs to step back – various people offered help – beginning of a steering group to share the work – secretary has largely taken work back on! Modern Slavery with input from police and Transforming Plymouth discussion and actions, rural crime update.
* February 2020 – updates on actions and projects, main item discussion of paper – theological reflection on rural ministry, available models of rural ministry, toolkit of resources and ideas. Hugely in depth and useful discussion on content and guidance for taking the work forward.
* July 2020 – Covid has started – first meeting by zoom – update on theological paper and toolkit – which has come together to be known as “Lightening the Load”. Development of toolkit and resources now to be taken on by Growing the Rural Church. Update on rural crime, presentation on Farming Now by Andrew Butler of NFU followed by discussion.
* November 2020 – by zoom – main item – update from Growing the Rural Church – relaunch and new direction – available resources etc. Short discussion on rural mental health/Covid.
* February 2021 – feedback from national rural officers’ conference, rural crime update, and presentation on linking lives befriending projects, main item – net zero in a rural context.
* July 2021 – people news, levelling up agenda as applied to rural areas with speakers from Rural Services Network, Devon Communities Together, and Mark Betson – in depth discussion particularly on Health inequalities and rural affordable housing and how the church can respond. Feedback from meetings and conferences attended.

P J Body

October 2021