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Rural is different: rural is special

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Those of us who live, work, worship and minister in the countryside know all too well that rural is different, that rural is special. Yet for us country folk there remain so many frustrations that secular policies may be driven by an urban agenda and shaped by urban perceptions. Health care provisions, public transport, post offices, and retail distribution, to name but a few vital areas, so often seem to be planned with the urban economy in mind. It is tempting, too, to imagine that even the church may be driven by an urban agenda, say in terms of emphases in recruitment, selection and training for ministry, in terms of the design of liturgy, in terms of theories about lay leadership, and perhaps even in terms of reader ministry.

Back in 1985 I did my bit to shake the complacency just a little by publishing a book called *Rural Anglicanism*.¹ Much was done in 1990 to alert the Church of England as a whole to the plight and to the potential of the rural church when the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas published its report *Faith in the Countryside*.² The commitment of the Anglican Church to continue to work on these issues has been seen more recently in the collection of essays by 13 bishops published as *Changing Rural Life*³ and by Bishop Alan Smith's new book *God-Shaped Mission*.⁴

Resourcing rural church

Two organisations have been particularly important in shaping and promoting the profile of the rural church over the past decades: the Rural Theology Association⁵ and the Arthur Rank Centre.⁶ The Rural Theology Association sponsors conferences, local groups, dissemination of information, and the journal *Rural Theology*. The Arthur Rank Centre sponsors training, resources, books, and the magazine *Country Way*. Together *Rural Theology* and *Country Way* are essential reading for all of us who take rural ministry seriously.

More recently a third organisation has entered the field (sponsored by the Arthur Rank Centre, St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden and the University) the Centre for Studies in Rural Ministry.⁷ The Centre offers opportunities for the professional development of those involved in rural ministry, leading to an MA degree. Some then chose to continue on the path to a PhD. Course participants have included clergy, readers, churchwardens and other lay people.

A helpful introduction to the issues that are currently shaping thinking in the rural church is provided by the themes covered in *Rural Theology*. Over the past few years that journal has covered 23 topics. So here is a taster.

Belonging

In an article entitled 'Belonging to rural church and society', Bishop David Walker argues that it is important to recognise the different ways in which people hold a sense of belonging to the rural church. He criticises the contemporary emphasis on the 'network' dimension of belonging that suggests geographical belonging to be of more limited significance. He recognises the continuing significance of geographical belonging for rural church and for rural society, but then proceeds to differentiate between diverse ways of belonging.

These twelve ways of belonging include: established residents (with strong family ties); full-time dwellers (who may be the non-working or home-working partner); commuters (who may or may not be long-time residents); privacy seekers (who remain deeply connected to urban society); trophy owners (who purchase rural properties as a sign of success); lifestyle shifters (who are mainly from the major cities and suburbs); travellers and gypsies (who are among the most marginalised in many rural communities); absent friends (former residents who return to visit); the missing vulnerable (young adults, divorcing couples, older people who are

forced from the community for economic reasons); the arriving vulnerable (older adults relocating to be near family); tourists and visitors (seeking welcome and identity); and the British public (feeling the countryside belongs to them).

Next Bishop Walker draws attention to the four different ways in which people may feel a sense of belonging to the rural church. He distinguishes between belonging with activities (say, the Sunday school); belonging with people (say, knowing the Reader); belonging with events (say, the annual fête); belonging with place (say attachment to the building or churchyard).

This article helps us to see how rural ministry needs to take seriously the different expectations of these different groups of people.

Baptism

In an article on 'Views on baptism and confirmation' the Revd Dr Keith Littler (a rural parish priest) reported on the findings of a survey conducted among clergy serving urban parishes and among clergy serving rural parishes. His data demonstrated that the views of urban and rural clergy were significantly different across a number of factors.

Rural clergy were less likely to take the view that churches should only baptise babies of regular churchgoers. They were also less likely to take the view that churches should only confirm young people if they came to church regularly.

On the other hand, rural clergy were more likely to agree that churches should baptise all babies whose parents request it. They were also more likely to agree that they would baptise

a baby if the parents confessed no faith, but the grandparents were regular communicants of their church.

Dr Littler concluded from these findings that rural clergy are more community oriented and probably more sensitive to the conservative views of their parishioners.

This article helps us to see how liturgical and pastoral practice may need to be shaped with different priorities within rural ministry.

Extended communion

In an article on 'Extended communion' Professor Stella Mills (a Methodist Local Preacher) makes a detailed case study of how this ministry was practiced in one rural benefice, using focus groups, interviews and questionnaires.

Extended communion has been developed in some places to make sense of the Anglican requirement for a priest to preside when there is a shortage of priests. A communion service is conducted in the normal way in one church. Then, after the Prayer of Thanksgiving, lay ministers leave to take the elements to another service in another building.

The practice of extended communion remains controversial. Listening to local experience, Professor Mills identified three main themes. First, she found a high level of satisfaction with this form of ministry among the congregations. Second, she found that the experience of extended communion raised the stakes for lay presidency. If lay people can bring the elements from another church, why cannot they be authorised to preside at the Prayer of Thanksgiving? Third, the satellite churches, served by extended communion, felt more

isolated from their rector and grew suspicious of the rector's long-term plans for their church. Would extended communion be followed by closure?

This article helps us to see how important it is to keep rural congregations informed about the changes that they are experiencing.

Closure

The maintenance of church buildings is one of the big problems facing rural ministry in the light of ageing congregations and fewer clergy. In an article on 'Church closure and membership statistics', Dr Carol Roberts (a non-stipendiary priest) presents the arguments for and against the closure of church buildings.

She notes that between 1970 and 2000 the Church of England saw a loss of 1,414 churches, that is, a reduction of 8%. She then profiles four rural dioceses that seem to have taken somewhat different views on closure. A higher rate of closure has occurred in Lincoln and Hereford than in Norwich and St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

Dr Roberts' data suggest that church closure may impact negatively on the performance of the rural church, as assessed by indicators of core membership and of outreach at times of major Christian festivals.

She concludes that, while a range of theological, economic, pastoral, social and strategic issues need to be given their due weight when making decisions on church closure, empirical information about the actual effect of church closure on membership statistics should be taken into account as well.

This article helps us to appreciate the importance of church buildings in keeping the gospel alive in rural communities.

Prayer requests

There seems to be a growing appreciation of the potential for rural churches to feed the spiritual quest of the many visitors who pass by and come in. One response to this ministry has been a re-kindled interest in prayer-boards, prayer-cards, and prayer-trees.

In an article on ‘Learning from prayer requests in a rural church’, Alec Brown (a rural vicar) undertook a careful study of the prayers left in one church. He found that these prayers provided a good insight into the spiritual quest of the visitors, and offered helpful clues regarding ways in which rural churches could assist these visitors on their journey.

This article reminds us of the importance of rural churches’ ministry to visitors and of the wisdom to listening to them.

Rural cathedrals

In an article on ‘Visitor experiences of St Davids Cathedral’, Dr Emyr Williams (academic researcher) reported on a detailed survey conducted among 514 visitors to that very rural cathedral. The survey covered four aspects of the visitor experience: overall impression, spiritual and religious aspects, aesthetic and historic aspects, and commercialisation.

The data demonstrated clear differences between two groups of visitors defined as ‘pilgrims’ (people who attend church services weekly) and as ‘secular tourists’ (people who never attend church services). While the cathedral was attracting many secular tourists, it seemed better

equipped to minister to pilgrims.

Dr Williams suggests that rural cathedrals may possess a unique opportunity to draw back the veil between the secular worldview and the worldview of transcendence, and to build bridges between contemporary spiritualities, implicit religious quests, and explicit religious traditions. Yet to do so, we need to understand more fully the backgrounds of those secular tourists.

This article reminds us that the opportunities open to rural cathedrals are shared with many of our rural churches.

Conclusion

Back in 1985, there was very little published research on the distinctive opportunities and challenges of rural ministry. Now it is increasingly being recognised that rural is different, and that rural is special.

Over the next decade women and men involved in reader ministry will be well placed to apply the fruits of recent research in rural ministry and to use their own special skills and gifts to contribute to this growing body of knowledge.

¹ Francis, L.J. (1985), *Rural Anglicanism: a future for young Christians?* London, Collins Liturgical Publications.

² Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas (1990), *Faith in the Countryside*, Worthing, Churchman Publishing.

³ Martineau, J., Francis, L.J. and Francis, P. (eds) (2004), *Changing Rural Life: a Christian response to key rural issues*, Norwich, Canterbury Press.

⁴ Smith, A. (2008), *God-shaped Mission: theological and practical perspectives from the rural church*, Norwich, Canterbury Press.

⁵ For further information, see www.rural-theology.org.uk

⁶ For further information, see www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

⁷ For further details, contact Canon Jeremy Martineau, e-mail: jfmartineau@onetel.net