

Original citation:

Walker, David Stuart. (2011) Marks of Mission and ways of belonging : shaping the Anglican agenda for occasional churchgoers in the countryside. *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 9 (1). pp. 100-116.

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Marks of Mission and ways of belonging: shaping the Anglican agenda for occasional churchgoers in the countryside.

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Abstract

This paper uses quantitative methods in conjunction with the five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion to identify opportunities and give direction to mission. It applies the model of belonging through activity, events, people and place developed in an earlier paper² to data provided by 326 occasional and 775 frequent churchgoers in a survey conducted in 27 rural parish churches. For occasional churchgoers a distinctive pattern of belonging, as predicted by the model, is observed and a simple characterisation made. The application of the Five Marks of Mission to this group is discussed and practical suggestions made to help churches engage effectively with them as both agents and recipients of mission activity. The paper concludes that perceived limitations in the faith of occasional church attendees may derive from a failure by the church to value their mode of belonging and to engage with them on their own territory.

KEYWORDS: Anglican; belonging; marks of mission; occasional churchgoers; empirical; rural.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Five Marks of Mission

In 1984 the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) produced a concise statement of Anglican mission applicable across the 38 diverse provinces that make up the global Anglican Communion. These Five Marks of Mission (Anglican Communion Office) were adopted internationally at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, were endorsed in 1996 by the General Synod of the Church of England and have since been taken up by a number of dioceses as criteria against which to evaluate both existing work and new ventures. They are currently found with minor local variations of wording, as was recommended by the ACC review in 1996, but most commonly in the form developed between 1984 and 1990³:

- To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom

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² D. S. Walker, *Belonging to rural church and society: theological and religious perspectives*, *Rural Theology*, 4.2 (2006), pp. 85-97.

³ Anglican Communion Office, *Five Marks of Mission*, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm> (accessed 310709).

- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain the life of the earth

The Five Marks of Mission featured in the preparatory Reader issued on arrival to all participating bishops in Lambeth 2008 and underpinned one of the key themes, 'The Bishop in Mission', of the conference. Walls & Rose⁴ provide both theological reflection and specific case studies by different authors from around the globe, indicating the widespread acceptance of the marks in many different cultural contexts and how they are being applied in specific situations.

The Marks of Mission are not restricted to the description of the activity of some small core religious group directed towards the world outside. Rather they guide the Church towards identifying programmes of action to which all who would self identify with the Christian faith can be called as both the agents of mission and the objects of mission. The wide view of mission activity that they encompass offers possibilities for engagement that might in principle attract those not easily drawn by narrower definitions; in particular they create opportunities to recruit and engage in mission tasks those who express Christian belonging but are occasional churchgoers.

It is perhaps surprising that despite their widespread acceptance and the ACC's recommendation for contextualisation, there is little or no evidence of the use of quantitative methods to clarify how the Marks of Mission might be applied in a particular locus. This paper sets out an example of how such a link can be made, using data collected recently through a survey of regular and occasional rural churchgoers.

1.2 A conceptual model of belonging

In response to what was seen as a narrow view of church belonging dominant in much present Anglican thinking and writing, and building on the concept of belonging as developed by Francis and Robbins⁵, the first paper in this series⁶ set out a fourfold model to describe belonging in church and community. The model focused specifically on the rural context; however the four components of the model: activities; people; places; events are not tied to the rural situation, and should be capable of being applied to any local community.

⁴ F. Walls & C. Rose, (eds), *Mission in the twenty-first century: exploring the five marks of global mission*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008).

⁵ L. J. Francis & M. Robbins, *Belonging without believing: a study in the social significance of Anglican identity and implicit religion among 13-15 year old males*, *Implicit Religion*, 7 (2004), pp. 37-54.

⁶ D. S. Walker, *Belonging to rural church and society: theological and religious perspectives*

'Activities' are those meetings, services, networks and groups, operating under the auspices of the church where there is an implied (if not explicit) assumption that participation on one occasion signifies a commitment or clear intention to participate on most similar occasions. Common examples from English parish life are Sunday Services, Family Services, House Groups and Church Council meetings. This category would equally include what are commonly called 'Fresh Expressions of Church' and activities based on social networks rather than geographical areas. Particularly since the publication of the book *Mission Shaped Church*⁷ attention in the Church of England has focused on this aspect of belonging as the key to outreach.

The 'people' category in the model seeks to capture that dimension of belonging which is articulated as the individual's sense of being known by, visited by or in relationship with a person or persons who represent the church to them. Whilst the priest is an obvious prime focus for such belonging it is important to recognize that other individuals, both offices holders (readers, churchwardens, vergers, Sunday school teachers) and others (cleaners, flower arrangers) including entirely private individuals, can also be substantial carriers of this form of self-identified membership.

'Places' through which individuals express church belonging include: the parish church itself, the churchyard and church halls. The popularity of church schools suggests that these also may play a significant role in enabling individuals to feel that they are expressing and acting out their belonging to their church.

'Events' are distinguished from activities by their 'stand alone' quality; an individual participating on one occasion is unlikely to feel (or be pressured by others to feel) that they have made a commitment to future participation. Occasional offices (marriages, baptisms and funerals) fall into this category as do services that take place on a very occasional basis (Christingles, Carol Services, Remembrance Sunday, Mothering Sunday, Midnight Mass, Summer Fete, Well Dressings) and one off events (such as those that mark particular anniversaries). A number of church events are special occurrences of activities (for example annual services that take place at the usual time and place of Sunday morning worship).

Within this model the harvest service represents a specific example of an event. It takes place only once a year and those choosing to attend are able to make a decision that, whilst being informed by previous experiences, is not constrained by the sense of obligation or commitment that characterizes activities. Usually, as was the case with the services covered in this survey, it happens at the regular time of the main Sunday service; as such it would expect to draw both those attracted to the event and committed weekly churchgoers. This makes it a particularly useful case to study. Because the harvest service is in itself an event the paper as a whole gives a picture which compares and contrasts 'activity' and 'event' belonging in rural England. In consequence there is not a specific set of results relating to 'event' belonging in the findings detailed below.

⁷ Archbishops' Council, *Mission Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

2. Method

2.1 Procedure

In autumn 2007 rural Church of England parishes in the Diocese of Worcester were invited to distribute a 92-item questionnaire to all those attending harvest services in church; the completed responses were required to be handed in before leaving the church. Participants were asked to answer questions giving information about themselves, their religious beliefs and practices, and their reasons for being at the service. Some 27 churches, covering a wide variety of contexts, participated in the exercise. The survey took between 5 and 10 minutes to answer all questions.

The churches participating represented a broad mix of rural Anglicanism, from deeply rural communities to those situated close to major urban centres; they covered a range of different churchmanship styles with the exception of 'traditional catholic' of which there are very few in rural Worcestershire.

2.2 Instrument

For the questions on the frequency of attendance at worship respondents were given a series of boxes and invited to tick the one which most closely reflected their practice. The choices provided were: nearly every week; at least once a month; at least 6 times a year; at least once a year; never. Otherwise, apart from questions of a demographic nature (for which a choice of boxes to tick was provided) participants were given either a straight choice of 'yes' or 'no' or offered a five point Likert scale: agree strongly; agree; not certain; disagree; disagree strongly.

2.3 Sample

From the 27 parishes 1454 sets of results were obtained and coded, an average of 54 per church. The number of individual responses from a church ranged from 9 to 143. There was a high rate of response to each individual question.

Of these, 805 respondents claimed to attend church 'nearly every week', 282 'at least monthly', 341 reported less frequent attendance (choosing the categories: 'at least 6 times a year', 'at least once a year' or 'never') whilst 26 did not respond to this question. The few respondents who did not complete large numbers of questions, and those who did not answer the question on church attendance, were removed from the data. In order to create a statistical comparison between two clearly distinct groups the three categories of less frequent attendance as set out above were grouped together whilst those who chose the 'at least monthly' category were excluded. This left a sample of 775 frequent churchgoers and 326 infrequent attendees. It is on these two subsets of the data that the following calculations have been based.

2.4 Analysis

Where questions were asked using the Likert scale the answers have been coded for this paper so as to include 'agree strongly' with 'agree' to form the 'yes' category. Both 'not

certain' and 'disagree strongly' are included with 'disagree' to form the 'no' category. Questions asking for a 'yes or no' answer are coded accordingly. In the tables below the following abbreviations are used: 'Wk' = attends nearly every week; 'In' = attends six times a year or less.

3. Results

An initial paper⁸ analysed the data to test the model of rural Anglican belonging set out previously⁹. The data established that those attending a rural Harvest Service appeared broadly similar in demography to a typical church congregation and they included a wide range of categories of rural dwellers. The four modes put forward in the Walker model provided a useful tool for analysing their belonging both to the church and to the local community. This initial analysis of the data revealed that the sample contained both a sizeable number of churchgoers who attended frequently and a good number of occasional churchgoers; sufficient to enable the comparison of these two groups to be possible.

3.1 Demography and Employment

Comparing the two groups of harvest attendees (those who attended nearly every week and those who attended six times a year or less) shows that whilst the occasional churchgoers included 38% men as against 33% of the frequent attendees the difference ($\chi^2 = 2.3$) was not statistically significant.

By contrast the age range showed a remarkable difference: 30% of occasional churchgoers were aged between 20 and 49 compared with only 14% of regulars. The middle age range of 50 to 69 years was similar for both groups, at 38% and 42% respectively. At the upper end of the scale 20% of occasional attendees were aged 70 or over compared with 35% of regular churchgoers ($\chi^2 = 132.6, p < .001$).

The age distribution for the occasional churchgoers does not exhibit the strong skew towards the older end of the range that is clearly demonstrated for the weekly attendees. The exclusion of the monthly churchgoers from the sample is important here. Many English churches locate harvest in their monthly All Age or Family Service. Within the model adopted here such services constitute regular activities and those who attend them frequently conform to the pattern of belonging through activities. This finding supports the hypothesis that an event such as Harvest Festival can have an important role to play in enabling churches to reach out towards a significantly younger group than regular activities achieve.

Table 1 Employment status

	In	Wk	χ^2	$p <$

⁸ D. S. Walker, The social significance of Harvest Festivals in the countryside: an empirical enquiry among those who attend, *Rural Theology* (in press)

⁹ D. S. Walker, Belonging to rural church and society: theological and religious perspectives

	%	%		
I have retired from work	32	57	58.0	.001
My work is land or agriculture based	12	3	30.8	.001
I work at home	17	10	10.2	.01
I hold down a demanding job	35	20	30.5	.001
I am a pensioner	33	59	62.6	.001
I receive (non pension) state benefits	6	10	4.6	.05
I pay tax on my income	59	57	0.21	ns

'Wk' = weekly churchgoers; 'In' = infrequent churchgoers (both as defined above)

Table 1 presents the employment status of the two groups. The significant differences between them are consistent with the age discrepancy noted above. They underline the distinction between a group of largely retired regular churchgoers and one of substantially working-age occasional attendees. Patterns of belonging and engagement in mission that fit well with patterns of retirement living are not necessarily going to be readily accessible to those with demanding employment; conversely the latter may have significant mission opportunities at work that are not addressed by an assumption that church is part of leisure activities.

3.2 Belonging

In table 2 questions that were distributed in a more randomized order within the survey are collected under three headings that distinguish between general belonging, the receipt of pastoral support and personal intimacy.

Table 2 Belonging with people

	In	Wk	χ^2	$p <$
	%	%		
Congregational belonging				
This is my family church	71	53	32.3	.001
I come to church to be with people	38	54	24.6	.001
I have a strong sense of belonging to this church community	37	72	127.7	.001
Pastoral support				
There are people here who help me cope with things	29	56	73.4	.001
There are people from this church who visit me at home	32	44	14.5	.001

The vicar visits me at home	14	32	41.4	.001
Another church leader visits me at home	4	19	41.8	.001

Personal intimacy

I have friends in this congregation	72	85	24.1	.001
I feel that people here know me well	45	66	46.1	.001
I feel that the vicar knows me well	35	60	58.7	.001

Occasional churchgoers responded significantly more strongly to the statement 'this is my family church'; almost three quarters agreeing compared with just over a half of the weekly attendees. It may be thought that the latter figure is depressed by a greater likelihood among regular churchgoers to attend harvest elsewhere than their own local church. In places where there is a benefice-wide pattern of worship weekly attendees may follow the main Sunday service around the churches; occasional churchgoers might be supposed more likely to attend harvest only if the church chosen to host it that year is the one with which they particularly identify. However, this is unlikely to account for much of the difference. Many multi-church rural benefices, including some represented in this sample, continue to hold a harvest service in each church every year; other parishes included in the survey do not have the type of service rota that expects worshippers to travel from place to place. Indeed, figures in table 4 below indicate that for the weekly churchgoing group attendance at harvest somewhere is almost the same as attendance at harvest in this specific church (81% compared to 79%) It is the occasional attendees who may be slightly more likely to go to harvest elsewhere (65% to 60% in answer to the same two questions) though the difference is not sufficient to be significant. Rather, the data suggest that 'family' continues to be an important factor in Christian self-identification, and that harvest is an occasion that is able to tap into that sufficiently strongly to achieve attendance from those who would not otherwise be motivated to come. Furthermore some 34% of those born in the community reported as occasional churchgoers compared with just 25% of those born elsewhere indicating the place that events such as harvest have in drawing those whose identification with the church may be more for family than religious reasons into worship.

That frequent attendance should be associated with a stronger sense of belonging through people is unsurprising, and indeed the weekly attendees had significantly higher positive responses to all the other questions in this section. More notable is that over a third of the occasional churchgoers had 'a strong sense of belonging to this church community', about a third scored at least one positive response to a question about pastoral support, and a similar number agreed that 'the vicar knows me well'. Almost three quarters claimed to have friends in the congregation. More specifically, in response to a later question, 24% of occasional churchgoers agreed with the statement, 'I am here because a friend invited me'.

Even for those who do not come to church frequently this research has found significant factors around personal relationships that link them to the congregation. It is highly likely that this strong network of relationships makes church a more welcoming place to those who attend infrequently, and indeed 72% of the occasional churchgoing group agreed with

the statement 'this church is welcoming to those who come occasionally', almost exactly the same percentage as among the weekly attendees.

3.3 Community belonging

The next series of questions sought to identify the extent to which church belonging is associated with involvement in the wider local community. In table 3 the results for the two groups are set out.

Table 3 Community Engagement and Involvement

	In	Wk	χ^2	$p <$
	%	%		
There are people here I meet at other community activities	57	67	11.4	.001
I am involved in other groups in this area	41	60	33.7	.001
I enjoy community organisations	56	62	3.31	.05
Being part of the church helps me to feel at home in this community	46	72	72.9	.001

From this table it is clear that there is indeed a strong positive association between more frequent churchgoing and higher community engagement. Both groups in our sample scored high positives but the weekly church attendees scored very much higher on all but one of the questions asked. Looking at the results in more detail some further observations can be made.

The middle two questions sought to distinguish between a general positive feel, 'I enjoy community organisations' and active participation, 'I am involved in other groups in the area'. This latter question gives a strong steer towards belonging through taking part in some regular activity with a sense of commitment; the former simply invites a comment on a general positive disposition to community. What the difference between the two sets of answers reveals is that those who belong in the church through regular participation are much more likely to belong in the wider community on the same basis. Belonging through activity is not something specific to an individual's relationship with the church but indicative of a general disposition towards commitment and activities that will be expressed across the range of engagements that an individual has.

The results for the top question are strongly positive for both groups. This suggests that the involvement of regular church members in community activities is something that makes them recognisable figures in the wider local community. As with the earlier results on friendships such profile is likely to be of assistance in making occasional churchgoers feel welcome when they come to worship on special occasions.

The final question is of interest for the fact that almost half of the occasional churchgoers nonetheless have a sufficient sense of belonging to the church to feel that this helps them

belong to the community. Again this supports the hypothesis of this and previous papers that church belonging is experienced much more widely than among frequent attendees at church activities.

3.4 Belonging with places

The importance of place in both the Christian tradition and life of the church has been explored in depth by Inge¹⁰ and Walker¹¹ has returned strongly positive answers to questions seeking identification with the church building. Table 4 sets out the responses of the two groups to a series of statements related to the place or building.

Table 4 Belonging and the place

	In	Wk	χ^2	$p <$
	%	%		
This church building is special to me	58	71	19.9	.001
It wouldn't be the same to attend a service in another church	32	31	.139	ns
The people here are more important to me than the place	45	60	22.3	.001
I have a strong sense of belonging to this church building	36	54	31.4	.001
In this church I feel close to God	49	76	78.1	.001
Most years I attend a harvest service somewhere	65	81	34.6	.001
Most years I attend a harvest service here	60	79	43.0	.001

For both groups it can be seen that there is a likelihood of well over 50% that an individual will attend a harvest service most years in the same building. Although just under a third of both groups would go as far as to agree that it wouldn't be the same to attend a service in another church, the option of attending elsewhere is not in practice chosen by many from either group.

For the most part the survey did not use questions that invited comparisons, the one exception being to ask respondents to consider the statement, 'The people here are more important to me than the place'. This was chosen to explore differences between groups of respondents as to the relative strengths of belonging through people and belonging through place. The answers to this question show that, when required to opt for one or the other, occasional churchgoers are significantly more likely to choose place than are weekly

¹⁰ John Inge, *A Christian theology of place*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

¹¹ D. S. Walker, *The social significance of Harvest Festivals in the countryside: an empirical enquiry among those who attend*.

attendees. This would suggest that the closure of church buildings to concentrate resources might be more likely to prove acceptable to the most regular participants in services; those who identify as Christian but come much less frequently are more likely to be put off by such rationalisations.

For both groups there was a notable difference between the responses to a statement about the building being 'special to me' and claiming a 'strong sense of belonging' with it; the former scoring much higher positive reactions. It is likely that it is the stronger form of the latter statement that deters some positive responses, indicating that respondents of both groups are more comfortable expressing more vague feelings than assenting to statements that carry an inference of commitment.

The difference between the responses to the statement, 'In this church I feel close to God', suggests that the religious sentiments of the two groups are worth exploring; this will be the subject of a further paper.

4. Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The continuing reach of rural harvest services beyond the core of regular church attendees has provided an opportunity to ask detailed questions of a sizeable group of occasional churchgoers, distinguished most of all by their willingness to come to an occasion that the model of Walker¹² categorizes as an 'event', and to compare their responses with those of a sample of frequent attendees present on the same occasion, adopting as a not unreasonable hypothesis the view that occasional harvest attendees are broadly typical of a much larger group of occasional churchgoers.

It has been found that the constituents of this 'event drawn' group of occasional attendees are much more varied in age than frequent churchgoers and therefore more likely to be of working age. Many have demanding jobs, though only a small minority in specifically rural industries. They are well linked to the frequent churchgoers in their community through friendships, though they feel much less close to the church community as an entity. A significant minority feel well known by people in the congregation and even by the vicar. They identify strongly with the notion of having a 'family church'. Friendship plays a part for some in encouraging them to come to a church event. When they do turn up they report the church as being welcoming. They are less likely than frequent churchgoers to have involvements in other local groups but profess a positive attitude to community organisations and they associate their church-belonging with helping them to feel at home in the community. Place matters mostly to them because of its family associations rather than the building for its own sake. Only about half of them feel close to God in church.

¹² D. S. Walker, *Belonging to rural church and society: theological and religious perspectives*.

With this characterisation it is now possible to investigate how occasional churchgoers engage alongside frequent attendees, as both agents and recipients of mission activity, using the Five Marks of Mission as the framework.

4.2 Pastoral care

At the heart of the ecclesiology of the Church of England is the concept of the 'cure of souls' of all the people who reside in or are on the electoral roll of a parish, irrespective of their participation in church activities. It is closely related to the Mark of Mission 'Respond to human need by loving service'. This cure resides first in the bishop but is explicitly shared with clergy at their licensings and institutions. Whilst the idea of an era in which England's parish clergy lived out this calling through engagement with the whole community is largely myth, it continues to represent an important aspiration and a counterbalance to congregationalism. With the reduction in stipendiary clergy, a corresponding increase in Readers and a proliferation of formal and informal ministries, the last century has seen the priest moving to the role of convenor and overseer of pastoral ministry rather than the sole local supplier. Where the vicar is not resident in the immediate locality, as is the case in the majority of rural communities, particular questions are posed as to the importance of having identifiable individuals who can be seen as embodying 'the church' in each place.

The findings in this paper demonstrate that for many occasional churchgoers the vicar is not only visible in the local community but also perceived as knowing his or her parishioners well. That this is still being achieved among some 30% or so of occasional attendees, and in an era when many clergy (including most of those whose parishes were included in this survey) have been in their benefices for less than a decade, is a tribute to the pastoral dedication, hard work and skills of priests. Beyond this they support the case for well developed patterns of delivering pastoral care in parishes, drawing on the friendship and local community networks that embrace frequent churchgoers and their less regular counterparts to build on the 29% of occasional churchgoers who already report that "there are people here who help me cope" and 32% who are visited at home. Much of what might be called pastoral care is delivered informally; it needs no wider authorisation and might actually suffer if it was seen to have been professionalized rather than drawing on the human links that have been identified in this paper. However the value of having a particular identifiable individual by whom parishioners can feel known as part of their belonging to the church would suggest further study should be made of the use of non-stipendiary clergy, permanent deacons or other focal ministers (part time and paid or unpaid) in rural communities, so that the formal pastoral 'reach' of clergy can be extended.

The findings here also suggest that some occasional churchgoers may be already engaged in, or open to, being agents of pastoral care and loving service in the community themselves. There may be scope both for churches to set up schemes that allow participation by this group and for supporting and encouraging informal support, for example by providing training.

4.3 Engaging with society and world

The Anglican Five Marks of Mission include the two specific commitments: 'to seek to transform unjust structures of society' and 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain the life of the earth'. These are wide reaching aspirations that neither lie within the capacity of churches or individuals to pursue on their own, nor would it be desirable for them to do so. Rather they call the church and its congregation members to work in partnership with other favourably disposed individuals and organisations.

At the local level churches are to be found at the heart of social projects, fundraising efforts and ethical campaigns; examples include the promotion of fair-trade produce, clubs and activities for older inhabitants, charity coffee mornings, influencing the secular planning process and holding door-to-door collections. Both the presence of occasional churchgoers at services such as harvest, and their reported social links with others in the congregation offer opportunities to seek to include them in church-based or church-managed social, environmental and ethical concerns.

Individual church members themselves are often at the heart of non-church based charities and other organisations working to achieve ethical and social goals; these might typically include the Women's Institute, local cricket club, school governors and village hall management committee. The findings of this paper have borne out the hypothesis that frequent churchgoers are likely to be involved with these wider local community groups and to enjoy involvement with them. Their networks of relationships are such that they meet in church with those with whom they also come into contact in other community activities.

A preference for regular activity as their mode of belonging assists regular churchgoers to provide the infrastructure (through committee membership, office holding and regular involvement) that is needed to sustain local organisations and institutions so that others, such as our group of occasional churchgoers, who are more predisposed to one off engagement or require a strong lead from people, can make their own contribution as agents of this mission work. Our survey results suggest that there is particular value in churches looking for mission actions under these two Marks of Mission that are event or relationship based, or linked explicitly to place. These might typically include letter writing campaigns; charitable door-to-door collections; attendance at protest meetings; charity coffee mornings; Fair Trade stalls; environmental enhancement events.

The rural parish churches of the Church of England are, it can be concluded, well placed to continue to use their strong community links in the furtherance of these marks of mission.

4.4 Evangelism and nurture

The model of differentiating between distinct ways of belonging, developed previously¹³ and used in this paper was designed originally in part to counter the equating of Christian faith with frequent participation in church activities. Nonetheless the tasks of proclaiming the gospel and of Christian nurture may be widely directed and certainly extended to occasional

¹³ D. S. Walker, The social significance of Harvest Festivals in the countryside: an empirical enquiry among those who attend.

churchgoers among others. These are encapsulated within the Five Marks of Mission as: 'to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom' and 'to teach, baptize and nurture new believers'. The occasional attendees identified and described above are clearly willing to attend events.

The strength of friendship links found in this survey establishes the value of personal relationships as a key component of proclaiming the gospel and nurturing believers. Many churches' mission strategies are based on the tenet that friendship is the most common route to joining a church. Where courses such as Alpha and Emmaus are used it may be advisable to encourage attendance through friendship or family links rather than through general advertisement. In addition, the value put on place, and in particular the association of place with family, suggests that careful thought as to how buildings are presented and interpreted will also have a significant role to play in both gospel proclamation and nurturing of occasional churchgoers. Such apparently non-evangelistic engagements as involving occasional churchgoers in buildings projects can be a major outreach tool in rural communities.

The model underlying this paper cautions against a simple equation of successful proclamation and nurture with increased attendance at weekly services or membership of church groups. For some that will undoubtedly be the case – a predisposition to event based belonging does not preclude becoming committed to activities – but for many the outcome of successful work on these two marks of mission will be a group of occasional churchgoers who have a better understanding of and commitment to their faith, which they act out through diverse and often one-off engagements in and beyond the local community, who access the church for pastoral support, feel connected to its public leadership and are willing to support it financially on a more frequent and more generous, if episodic, basis.

It is also important to note that the occasional churchgoers, whose faith is supported by relationships, places and events rather than activities, have something here to teach frequent attendees about the importance of diversity in how Christian faith is lived out and expressed. Part of the process of growing in Christian maturity is an increasing recognition of the faith of others; proclamation of this gospel truth by our occasional group to their frequent churchgoing counterparts is mission in its full sense.

5. Conclusions

This paper has first demonstrated the existence of a sizeable group of occasional rural churchgoers whose behaviour and ways of belonging to church can, using the model proposed by Walker¹⁴ be compared and contrasted with those of frequent attendees. It has then shown how understanding this group enables such people to work alongside regular churchgoers to fulfil the Five Marks of Mission adopted by the Anglican Communion.

The evidence of a rich and complex pattern of belonging challenges the often implicit assumption that occasional churchgoers are 'nominal' Christians, a premise which underpins

¹⁴ D. S. Walker, *Belonging to rural church and society: theological and religious perspectives*.

much current writing and thinking on mission. In its place it establishes the notion that these are Christians who express their belonging to God and Christ in different and less easily numerically assessed ways from the present dominant model of regular Sunday worship and involvement in church groups and committees.

Taking part alongside regular churchgoers in the performance of the Five Marks of Mission in the ways described above represents a significant level of commitment, a real belonging to the local church and a genuine participation in the task of Christian discipleship on the part of occasional churchgoers. Putting the opportunities for such at the heart of the life of the local church is not a means of inoculating individuals against a proper personal commitment to Christ but rather recognizes that for some people such commitment is expressed differently. If occasional churchgoers understand, express and live out their faith in a less articulate fashion than frequent churchgoers this may be more to do with the systemic failure of churches to engage seriously with them on their own territory, rather than indicative of a lesser commitment to what they consider it is to be Christian.

Those who come to the rural Harvest service and other occasional church events, including through a regular pattern of attendance at baptisms, marriages and funerals in the parish, have been seen to be amenable to living out the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion. Drawing them in to such a programme of involvement may help demonstrate a model of church that is not simply one of professional religious as agents and laity as recipients or consumers of religion. Indeed it may be the fact that churchgoing is seen as a largely passive activity that deters some from attending more frequently.

Finally, adoption of the model described in this paper may well help some individuals to move through areas of engagement to which they find it easier to commit towards a wider involvement in the life of the local church, including more frequent participation in its regular worship.