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Harvest Festivals in the Countryside

The social significance of Harvest Festivals in the countryside: an empirical enquiry among those who attend.

Abstract

Many commentators have noted the diversification and fragmentation of village life. The present paper draws on the conceptualisation proposed by Walker (2006) to distinguish between ten identifiable groups of individuals visible in the rural landscape (including established residents, lifestyle shifters and tourists) and four ways in which individuals may experience or express their belonging to that rural community (through activities, events, people and places). In order to examine the extent to which Harvest Festivals enable rural Anglican churches to contact a broad cross section of the community, data were provided by 1454 attendees at Harvest Festival services conducted within 27 rural churches in the Diocese of Worcester. The data suggests that, although demographically Harvest Festival and normal Sunday congregations are similar, Harvest services continue to reach out into the varied categories of rural inhabitants and attract significant numbers of non-residents, occasional churchgoers and those who belong by virtue of people, events or place rather than through activity based participation. As such it continues to provide an example of the public role and significance of religious practice in a 21st century setting.

Introduction

The “Walker” model

Many commentators have drawn attention in recent years to the increasing diversity and fragmentation of rural communities. Martineau, Francis and Francis (2004) in particular bring together contributions from a number of authors who cover (inter alia) governance, isolation, dynamics of community and the interplay between private property and public good. As the nature of country life has changed, rural Anglicanism itself has had many challenges to face (as set out in, for example, Francis 1985, Russell 1986 and more recently Bowden 1994). Whilst some rural parish churches and the individuals associated with them have retained or even found a central role as the hub of a wide range of community activity and social provision, others have become marginal eclectic gatherings, the preserve of a particular section of the populace, or one among several agencies competing for the time and energies of local people.

In consequence of this fragmentation, the study of and engagement with contemporary rural issues, including church issues, will benefit from a categorisation of the rural population along lines that enable diverse behaviours and responses to be understood and, to some extent, predicted.

An earlier paper (Walker 2006) gave a qualitative description of 12 distinct types of people associated with present day rural areas. It was hypothesised that distinct patterns of behaviour were likely to be found where individuals had come to dwell in the countryside for different reasons, or where the nature of their ongoing engagement with the community and their surroundings differed. Such categorises have the advantage of being fairly easy to define and indeed self-define. Examples were given

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as to how the varied groups relate in different ways to particular elements of the mission and ministry of the local parish church.

Ten of the categories developed in that paper are relevant to the data presented here. *Lifestyle shifters* had been attracted out of urban areas by a (real or imagined) better way of living. *Trophy owners* had bought into rural living as a symbol of material success. *Privacy seekers* were looking for peace and quiet, often to re-balance lives lived largely at the hectic pace of the city. *Established residents* included those born locally as well as others who had lived many years there. Some were also *commuters*, especially where rural work had reduced. *Travellers and gypsies* were significant as the largest minority ethnic group in many areas of rural England. The *arriving vulnerable* had often come to live near family members, in order to receive support; the *missing vulnerable* were those forced to move away at times of (for example) illness, family breakdown or household formation. *Absent friends* were people who had strong connections with a community but were unable to live in it. *Tourists and visitors* had less formal connections but often identified strongly with the place.

The same paper also developed a fourfold model of belonging which distinguished between belonging through activities, events, people and places. Those who belong through activities are most likely to join organisations and groups within the community and contribute to their maintenance by regular participation, including volunteering, sitting on committees and planning activities. Those who belong through events commit themselves one occasion at a time and may well withdraw if put under pressure to make an ongoing commitment. Belonging through places recognises the powerful role that particular localities or buildings, and especially the historic rural parish church, have in many people's sense of rootedness, purpose and destiny. Belonging through people includes the importance of kinship and friendship relationships as well as identifying how particular "public" individuals, such as the Church of England priest or school head teacher, may carry a wider iconic status.

The model recognised not only that the motivation for expressing and feeling belonging may differ from person to person, but that the same person is likely to operate in one dominant mode for belonging to bodies as varied as the local cricket club, village school and Women's Institute. By presenting "place", "event" and "people" as three significant alternatives it opened the way for a critique of the "activity" based model that underpins much present writing about and practice of church ministry and mission but which in some rural parishes has led to significant misunderstandings within congregations, (as for example when weekly churchgoers doubt the commitment and faith of those responding to God in a different way,) and to lost opportunities of engaging effectively with the wider community.

The "special" case of Harvest Services

Harvest Services grew rapidly from an individual liturgy of thanksgiving devised and led by the Reverend Robert Stephen Hawker in the Cornish parish of Morwenstow in 1843 (Baring-Gould 2002). Within a generation they had become part of the furniture in Church of England parishes in both villages and towns. It is probably no coincidence that this growth came at just the moment when the nation was going through rapid urbanisation: it emphasised a link with the land, and the produce of the land, that was no longer part of the daily experience of many people. But its

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popularity was not confined to the places to which rural people were being displaced by the need for work. This was no mere nostalgic ritual to commemorate a way of living they had left behind. In the countryside the Harvest Service no doubt served as an affirmation of the continued importance of food production, and hence of those engaged in it. It would be another century before England became substantially served by imported produce, but intriguingly Harvest has survived this transition too; even the most urban parishes are likely to feature it in their calendar, even if they seek to reinterpret some of its elements to meet their circumstances.

The distinctive element of most Harvest services is that the church is richly decorated with a range of produce (see for example Francis, 1996). This may nowadays include processed foodstuffs (tinned goods for example) as well as flowers, vegetables, bread and fruit. In many parishes the service will have a deliberately “accessible” style, keeping the structure simple, giving children an important part to play, and incorporating interactive rituals such as a procession where individual gifts of produce are brought forward to the altar steps. Two particular nineteenth century Harvest hymns remain very strongly associated with the festival, though supplemented by an increasingly wide range of other musical material. The service may be followed by a Harvest Supper, and the produce sold, auctioned, distributed to the elderly of the community or donated to charities serving the needy in nearby towns; but these are usually arranged at other times within a few days of the service itself rather than being incorporated into one event. Attempts in the late twentieth century to make the service more relevant in urban areas, by celebrating “industrial Harvests” where the output of factories and mines was brought to church, did not catch on widely, and neither these nor yet further generalisations into the notion of a celebration of work, (though the latter might in theory have more in common with the service economy of the present day) have impacted upon the rural areas that are the focus of this study.

By contrast with some other major festivals of the Church’s year that continue to draw larger and potentially wider congregations, Harvest is dogmatically light. Whilst it refers to God as the one who creates and sustains life it carries none of the doctrinal weight of Christmas or Easter, and as such may speak to the implicit religiousness of many people who wish to participate in a communal ritual but are uneasy with the core creedal elements of the Christian faith (see for example Bailey, 1997). It is distinguished from some other special services with limited doctrinal content, such as Mothering Sunday and Remembrance Sunday, by having no specific national day associated with it; hence it does not benefit from the wider secular publicity (and consequent sense of being part of a national commemoration) that those occasions receive. Whilst it has some similarities with Christingle, the latter is most often incorporated into the preparations for Christmas rather than standing alone.

As a free standing event Harvest carries no expectation of regular commitment; it speaks powerfully of the importance of land and hence place; it may well be an occasion on which personal invitation plays a role in bringing people into church and yet it remains part of the Sunday by Sunday routine to which regular churchgoers are attuned. For these reasons it is a good potential candidate for drawing people from across the diverse ways of belonging listed above.

The task of this present paper is to use the tools developed in Walker (2006) to examine the data collected at Harvest 2007. It will look at what evidence this specific

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traditional church event provides as to how far the rural church is engaging with the pluriform pattern of belonging in modern rural society and whether it is reaching into the increasingly diverse community within which it is set; hence whether the methodology developed in the previous paper provides implications for how Harvest fits into the mission and ministry of the rural English parish.

Method

Procedure

A total of 27 Church of England churches from across the Diocese of Worcester agreed to distribute questionnaires to adults attending Harvest Services in 2007. All had some claim to be rural, ranging from small isolated communities to villages bordering on the edges of urban areas, some had resident incumbents, others not. Pencils were provided and those attending were asked to complete their questionnaires before leaving after the service. It was suggested to clergy that the forms would be best distributed as the congregation arrived and that some time might be allowed before the conclusion of the service, as well as over refreshments afterwards. The aim of seeking completion at the time of the service was to minimise any skew towards the most committed church members; these being considered disproportionately more likely to return completed questionnaires at a later date.

Sample

In response to the survey 1454 valid questionnaires were returned, an average of 54 per church. There was a good range of sizes of returns from 9 to 143. There was a high rate of response to each individual question.

Instrument

The themes explored were chosen in order to permit their analysis using the tools developed in the earlier paper. The present paper draws on the following aspects of the questionnaire.

The majority of questions analysed here sought factual information and accordingly offered “yes/no” responses or a box to be ticked from a series. These covered: reasons why people had come to live in the community served by the church (13); connections with the community of those not resident (10); working/economic status (10); connections with the church in which the service was taking place (9); basic demographic information (6). An additional 25 questions about individuals’ relationships with the church and the community were explored using a five-point Likert scale with the offered responses being: strongly agree; agree; not certain; disagree; disagree strongly.

Analysis

The numerical results to the Likert scale questions are presented below in tables with columns headed respectively: % Yes; % ?; % No. The first column aggregates those responding “agree” and “agree strongly”, the second aggregates “not certain” with

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those who left the question blank, the final column aggregates “disagree” and “disagree strongly” responses. The “yes/no” and tick box questions are not aggregated in any way unless stated explicitly in the following discussion. In this case the percentages given exclude those who left the question blank

Results and discussion

Demographic information

Francis (1996) found that for typical church attendance adult females outnumber males by a figure of 2 to 1. It might be thought that Harvest would attract more men, either because of its relationship to the world of agriculture where employment is not so heavily female or due to the impact of regular women attendees at services bringing their partners for this special occasion. However the respondents to the questionnaire were 66% women, indistinguishable from the normal Sunday pattern.

Unpublished figures from a survey in 2003 estimated (albeit on a small sample) an average age of 61 for adult church attendees in the Diocese of Worcester. The adult age distribution of the respondents showed a similar heavy skew towards the upper ends of the range with 2% in the 20–29 bracket; 6% aged 30-39; 10% aged 40-49; 15% aged 50-59; 27% aged 60-69 and 33% over 70.

Some 16% described themselves as visitors either from nearby or further afield. This is probably significantly higher than most rural churches would experience on an average Sunday. Harvest still reaches out beyond the locality of the congregation.

From this basic demographic analysis it can be concluded that to whatever extent Harvest services attract larger congregations than attend church on an ordinary Sunday, their catchment is “more of the same”. Any distinctiveness will lie in the respondents’ answers to more specific questions.

Harvest as an event

In terms of the model being used in this paper, it might be hypothesised that Harvest constitutes an event; that is to say that attendance at it does not require or expect the participant to be committed to any habitual or frequent programme of activities; where by contrast attendance at a normal Sunday service or monthly Family Service might imply both in the mind of the individual and in the minds of others attending the same event that the attendee would come regularly.

The extent to which Harvest attendance is linked or not to regular Sunday churchgoing was explored by asking respondents to indicate their frequency of attendance at the church where they were completing the questionnaire: 56% reported attending church nearly every week; 20% at least once a month; 14% at least 6 times a year; 10% less than 6 times per year.

The significant finding here is that some 25% of those present claimed to attend the church less than monthly. It is supported by the fact that only 63% of respondents indicated that their names were entered on the church electoral roll. Comparisons of self-reported church attendance with congregation figures produced by ministers for

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denominational statistical returns invariably show that people claim more frequent church attendance than is actually the case. This all suggests that the true figure of occasional attendees in our sample would actually be greater than one in four. The size of these figures allows us to conclude that the reportedly larger congregations that churches enjoy at Harvest reflects something beyond the bunching effect that might be produced by a higher than normal proportion of the monthly or “nearly every week” categories turning up on the same day.

In terms of the model being used here, those who attend monthly or more frequently could be said to express their belonging through participation in regular activities, those who come less often, especially those who have not chosen to be on the electoral roll, are “event” attendees; people who make largely independent decisions to come to church on each separate occasion. Harvest is indeed an “event”.

The importance to the respondents of other events, such as baptisms and weddings, was explored through a further series of questions; the results are set out in table 1 below.

Connections through occasional offices	%
I was baptised/christened here	11
I was married here	13
Family members were baptised/christened here	38
family members were married here	29
I visit a grave in the churchyard	24

Table 1: occasional offices and related connections

The question about graves was preferred to a more general one about funeral services as the former (including the burial of cremated remains) was felt to provide a better indicator of a strong connection. The high figures for positive responses to these questions are consonant with the experience of clergy that such events are an essential tool of mission.

Belonging and the place

In this section and some others respondents were invited to signify agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale as indicated earlier.

Belonging through place	% yes	% ?	% no
This church building is special to me	68	27	5
It wouldn't be the same to attend a service in another church	31	37	31
The people here are more important to me than the place	53	37	10
I have a strong sense of belonging to this church building	50	38	12
In this church I feel close to God	68	29	3

Table 2: belonging with the church building

The significance of the building is illustrated powerfully by the fact that 31% of respondents felt it would not be the same to attend a service in another church. That less than a third of those considered the building more important than the people

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indicates that it is not easy to separate the venue from the congregation who populate it. Even if for over half of respondents the people matter more than the building, the scores for the building being “special”, inculcating belonging, and enabling the respondent to feel close to God reflect that place matters, and matters deeply. Further analysis of the data indicated that some 83% either reported agreement with at least one of those three statements or disagreed that the people are more important than the place. The conjecture in Walker 2006 that place is an important constituent of belonging for those who consider themselves as members of the rural church is borne out by these findings.

Belonging and activity in the community

The following group of questions was asked in order to explore the notion of activity as a major mode of rural belonging.

Belonging to the wider community	% yes	% ?	% no
There are people here I meet at other community activities	65	26	9
I am involved in other groups in the area	54	30	16
I enjoy community organisations	60	34	7
Being part of the church helps me to feel at home in this community	64	32	4

table 3: Belonging with the wider community

The substantial difference between the answers to the first two questions picks up the distinction between formal community groups and other less structured activities. These latter might include events such as coffee mornings that are informally arranged and school functions that are laid on by an institution rather than requiring involvement in group activities. Both figures are higher than the 46% who said they attended non church functions in the locality but lower than the 73% who indicated that they attend other church functions in the local community and the 79% who claimed to be “members of the congregation”.

That all of these questions provoked strongly positive responses, indicates both that church attendees are likely to be active in wider community events and that church membership has a significant role to play in inculcating a wider sense of belonging in the locality. Alongside the figures (above) of some three quarters of our sample who claimed monthly or more frequent church attendance, this would suggest both that activity is a main constituent of rural belonging and that those predisposed to belong to church in this way are also likely to belong to other community organisations.

We can conclude that activity is a model of belonging that is likely to lead to participating in the life of a range of distinct community organisations, of which the church is one. However, there remains a significant number whose only involvement in activities in the community is through the church.

Belonging with people

The next series of responses cover statements that investigate the role of relationships in rural belonging. For the sake of analysis they have been divided between pastoral support, congregational belonging and personal intimacy.

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Belonging with people	% yes	% ?	% no
Congregational belonging			
This is my "family" church	66	24	9
I come to church to be with other people	48	34	17
I have a strong sense of belonging to this church community	62	30	8
Pastoral support			
There are people here who help me cope with things	48	38	13
There are people from this church who visit me at home	42	33	25
The vicar visits me at home	26	37	37
Another church leader visits me at home	14	44	43
Personal intimacy			
I have friends in this congregation	81	17	2
I feel that people here know me well	58	33	9
I feel that the vicar knows me well	51	36	13

table 4: Belonging with people

In terms of both personal intimacy and congregational belonging all statements received strongly positive responses. In an era when most rural incumbents have several parishes to cover it is significant that 51% of respondents felt that the vicar knew them well, and that this is not dependent on the traditional pattern of home visiting by the priest which was reported much less frequently (26%). This difference may indicate that the community role of the vicar, being visible at social events and elsewhere, remains significant. The level of reported friendship was extremely high at 81%, consistent both with the view that it is very hard to be an anonymous individual in a rural congregation and with the contention that those who attend churches occasionally do so in the company of friends. Pastoral support does exist, but of a much less formal nature than the traditional model; some 48% of respondents felt there were people in the church who help them to cope; only a slightly lower figure (42%) are visited by someone at home.

The responses to one later question also shed light on the significance of relationships to the sample. 16% agreed or agreed strongly with the statement that they had come to the service because a friend had invited them.

These results confirm the hypothesis that relationships are an important factor in belonging to rural church communities.

Categories of rural Harvest attendees

The categories of rural "belongers" described in Walker (2006) were here explored through a series of questions asking about their arrival in and connections with the community. Some additional information about employment and economic status is also used. The data is analysed to test the hypothesis that Harvest services attract a diverse range of rural people.

Slightly over 80% of those responding indicated that they lived "in the community served by this church". Of these some 24% had always lived there (19% of the total sample). Those in this latter category fall within the definition of *established residents*

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from the previous paper. They are clearly present in numbers in Harvest congregations; an indication that new arrivals with different liturgical styles and preferences have not alienated them.

For those who had moved to live in the community, a series of questions explored the relative draw factors of family, work, lifestyle choice and retreat. The ordering of the questions was mixed. Respondents were invited to give an answer to each question separately, in order to capture the multiplicity of reasons that might have led to their move.

Reason for moving	%
Lifestyle factors	
to live in a good locality	33
for a better quality of life	29
for a desirable home	29
family factors	
to be near to family	13
to marry / live with partner	13
following breakdown of relationship	2
work factors	
I work in the local community	17
to commute to work	16
for retirement	13
other factors	
to find privacy	7
because I could afford to rent	2
for health reasons	2

table 5: reasons for moving to this community

The earlier paper identified *lifestyle shifters* and *trophy owners* among the categories of rural inhabitants. The distinction between the two may be quite fine, and in terms of the types and levels of involvement in the community both were seen as likely participants. The large number of lifestyle responses suggests that attending such events is indeed part of the way of life that those moving to the countryside are doing so in order to adopt. The results clearly show that lifestyle factors considerably outweigh all others as reasons for moving into a rural parish among those who attend Harvest services.

Privacy seekers are a significant proportion of some rural communities; they are typically higher earners looking for peace and quiet. Some are second home owners escaping to the countryside after a demanding week. Whilst some 25% of respondents claimed to “hold down a demanding job” only 7% of incomers (5% of total sample) cited privacy as a reason. This is consistent with the conjecture in the earlier paper that this category would not be likely to participate in church events.

The presence of a significant number of *commuters* indicates that Harvest services do not exclude those whose work is outside the locality, notwithstanding the fact that rural commuting in Worcestershire is largely into the urban centres for employment with no natural rural link.

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The *arriving vulnerable* are those moving into the countryside at a point of need; typically for reasons of health, accommodation or relationship breakdown. In each case only 2% of incomers responded positively to questions relating to these criteria. It is perhaps particularly notable that whilst breakdown of relationship is a very high factor in general household formation it features very low at 2% in this sample. Cultural attitudes have largely moved on from an era when divorcees felt unwelcome in Church of England congregations, reinforcing the view that this reflects the difficulty in affording rural accommodation in such circumstances and is part of the general push to the towns of those undergoing negative life experiences, where they form the category of *missing vulnerable* identified in the earlier paper (Walker 2006).

Travellers and gypsies are an important historical feature of Worcestershire, they still account for up the largest minority ethnic group in the rural parts of the county. Only 11 respondents identified themselves as from this category, less than 1% of the sample, despite their longstanding connections with the agricultural trades and skills that are ostensibly being affirmed at Harvest services. This is consistent with the view that they do not feel welcomed at activities arranged other than by or for their own community.

The 283 (20%) respondents who indicated they were not local residents were asked what connections they had with the community. They were offered a range of responses covering work, family, lifestyle, church and historical factors. Their answers are set out in table 6 below.

Local connections	%
personal factors	
I used to live here	25
my work brings me here	7
relationship factors	
my parents live here	12
I have friends who live here	47
lifestyle factors	
I like visiting this area	37
I would like to live here	14
church factors	
I regard this as my main church	43
I only come here for church	20

table 6: non-residents' connections with the locality

Of note here is the range of factors that are cited by at least 20% of respondents. Personal history is unsurprisingly important as a factor; church allegiance is often not transferred unless the person moves a significant distance away. Friendships scored highly at almost 50%, indicating the importance to churches of sustaining such relationships if non residents are to feel part of the church community. It is significant that a very large majority (80%) make some claim to coming into the community for something other than church attendance. Many of them would fall into the category of *absent friends*. For Harvest at least they are in church, and in church in numbers.

The remaining category from the earlier paper explored here is that of *tourists and visitors*. These people are drawn to the countryside without necessarily having any

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immediate family or historic connections. It would appear from the responses to these questions that rural churches do reach out into this category at Harvest.

This section has demonstrated that Harvest services are not the preserve of any single category of the rural population, they attract long term residents, more recent arrivals and visitors with some connection to the community. They are frequented by those who have been drawn to identify with the rural community for a wide range of reasons.

Conclusions

Despite accusations of irrelevance to modern living Harvest services continue to be a staple yet distinctive part of the rural English liturgical calendar. They draw congregations principally from their locality and demographically similar to their regular Sunday attendances but with significant numbers of occasional attendees, including visitors from outside the parish. Against any suggestion that Harvest is primarily of interest either to the agricultural community, or to some other subgroup of rural England, we have established that most categories of rural residents are present. Those who come include significant numbers who express their belonging to church and community by attachment to place and to people as well as being drawn by the “event” nature of the festival. Harvest is an example of the enduring public significance of religious practice in rural England. Churches that understand the make up of their Harvest congregations, and tailor their liturgies and pastoral ministries accordingly, will be best placed both to meet the needs of their congregations and to use the festival as a form of outreach into the wider community. What can be learned from the study of Harvest may have relevance to other occasions of celebratory activity and worship, both traditional and emerging.

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