

Original citation:

Walker, David Stuart (2006) Belonging to rural church and society : theological and religious perspectives. *Rural Theology*, 4 (2). pp. 85-97.

Permanent WRAP URL:

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Publisher's statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Rural Theology* available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1179/rut_2006_4_2_002

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Abstract

Recent writing has focussed on the “network” dimension of belonging, with the inference that geographical belonging is of more limited importance. This paper examines the continuing significance of the latter concept with reference to the rural English community and Parish Church. Key categories of individuals with a claim to belong in the English countryside are identified and the notion of belonging as a theological concept is expanded. A fourfold model of belonging to activities, people, events and places is developed and used to investigate how the ministry of the Parish Church relates to those who would define themselves as belonging with it.

Introduction

Much has been written in recent years to put forward the theory that in British society belonging is now less to do with neighbourhood or geography than with communities of interest. Mission Shaped Church (Archbishops’ Council 2004: 4) states, “In a network society the importance of place is secondary to the importance of ‘flows’”. There is some truth in the increased importance of non-geographical belonging, and the need for churches among others to be attentive to the challenges and opportunities presented, but this should not be allowed to cloud the fact that for many people their belonging with, or alienation from, specific geographical communities, plays a vital role in their lives; perhaps no more so than in the countryside, where the connection with place remains at its strongest.

This paper follows the definitions of Francis and Robbins (2004), over against Davie (1994) in taking Christian belonging as “self-defined religious affiliation” rather than collapsing it into either doctrinal affirmation or participation in specified activities. Even in looking at the wider concept of rural living, the distinction between participation in activities and general notions of identity remains extremely useful. Whilst the formal language of “social capital” is not used, belonging is clearly closely aligned with bonding capital. Moreover, the use of concepts of belonging that allow diverse groups to belong with the same institution or place is conducive to the creation of bridging capital.

Diverse ways of Belonging in Rural Communities

There is a huge diversity of interests in rural Britain. Not everybody wants to belong in the same way or to the same extent. Different expressions of belonging exist in some tension and conflict. Not all are present in all communities. To understand this better, the present paper offers a series of types or categories. These are intended to be illustrative rather than precise, exclusive or comprehensive. Few people fit entirely and solely into one type. Moreover they include not only those living within the rural setting but others who still belong there but have either chosen to leave or been forced out.

Commuters: These may or may not be long time residents. Their work takes them out of the community frequently, usually to urban centres. Particularly if they are longstanding residents they may feel that they belong to the place where they live. Time and energy spent both working and travelling limit their ability to participate in rural activities. For some workplace relationships are more significant than

neighbourhood ones, and belonging is felt more strongly to organisations based around work rather than home. Others seek ways to enhance their belonging to the local community, as long as the time and effort is affordable.

Privacy seekers: Some people move to the countryside to get away from the noise and intrusions of urban life. Many remain deeply connected to urban society, not least through holding down substantial professional roles. Their social lives and any church membership are likely to be outside the rural community. Some have a high sense of belonging associated with the property where they live, and express that through objections to planning applications which impact upon it.

Trophy owners: Rural homes are often purchased as a symbol of success. For some who do so their primary belonging is with their achievements. Whilst many are looking for privacy, others see the rural lifestyle as well as location as part of the prize. Some wish to carve out a status within the local community. They are likely to be articulate and accustomed to leadership and thrive in structures that imitate those of the business or commercial world. They often seek to take prominent roles in activities with which they engage. Some resent the arrival into the community of others who are perceived as less worthy of the prize.

Established residents: Those who have lived in a locality the longest are the most likely to have an innate sense of belonging to their rural community that does not require high levels of active participation to sustain. In principle many are happy for others to run things, but some react negatively if local institutions are taken in new directions. They are likely to have specific family ties within the community including relatives buried in the churchyard.

Travellers and gypsies: These are among the most marginalised in many rural communities. Historically the rural economy has depended on them for both seasonal agricultural work and general manual labour. Today they compete with urban labourers and migrant workers. Their distinctive lifestyle and sense of belonging to their own community is frequently perceived as threatening and intrusive by other rural dwellers. They are likely to have a strong sense of belonging with the places around which they travel, including rural church buildings. They often experience problems in accessing basic services such as education and healthcare. They are unlikely to be welcome participants in many rural activities, except those arranged by their own community.

Lifestyle shifters: Some urban dwellers who experience an attachment to the countryside make a definite choice to move there in order to be part of rural life. They have a great deal invested (often literally) in the success of the move. Many are seeking a sense of peace, to re-engage with the type of community they remember from many years previously, to tend a garden, or to be part of a smaller, more manageable community. Some are putting into effect a belonging they have long felt with a specific location or the countryside in general. As well as “pull” factors there are also “push” elements such as the desire to escape from a rushed urban existence, the fear of crime or the ethnic and cultural diversity of many towns and cities. Moving out from high price areas in London and the South East of England releases capital to fund a less busy existence or a higher standard of living.

They are less likely than others to wish to maintain strong patterns of belonging with their former neighbourhoods and networks. Some look to participation in local institutions as the way of forging a new sense of belonging.

Absent friends: Former residents and the descendants of such are among those who have a sense of belonging with a rural community in which they are not living. Many still have family living there as well as graves in the churchyard. The place provides a sense of home to an experience of living in exile. Because the attachment is rooted in history they may well have much of their sense of belonging invested in things remaining as they formerly were. They are far more likely to contribute to an appeal to restore the parish church than to support efforts to re-order its internal furnishings and decor. They will expect the church to be available for their rites of passage. Distance makes it unlikely they will be active participants in many activities.

Full-time dwellers: There are still many who spend the substantial bulk of their waking hours within the community. Some are members of the same household as one of the earlier categories, for example the partner of a commuter who does not themselves go out to work. Homeworkers are increasing in number through the opportunities presented by information and communications technologies. Others are retired residents, the relatively few who go out to work within the community, and children. They are likely to have less disposable income than others and to be more dependent on facilities in the community itself. Some have time and energy to put into local institutions. Many less mobile, often older, residents suffer from isolation.

The missing vulnerable: Whereas fifty years ago the typical life story of a British citizen was one of stability and steady progression (through adulthood, marriage, family and career and towards greater financial security) the present picture is much more one of cycles, with significant downturns such as the need to make a complete change of career, the breakdown of a close personal relationship or a prolonged period of dependency through illness. The almost total collapse of rural social housing has removed what small provision previously existed to sustain individuals and households in their village through such a crisis. Divorcing couples, young adults reaching independence and older persons requiring sheltered or supported accommodation (for example) are forced into the towns at their moment of greatest need. In doing so they are cut off from the places where they feel that they belong, and from the people and institutions to which they would naturally turn for support and with which they participate.

Arriving vulnerable: As a counterpoint to the previous group there are those who arrive in the countryside at a moment of vulnerability. For example, older adults or those with increasing care needs who relocate near to where family members are living, but have no other natural links or connections in the locality. There is evidence of single parents or divorcing partners moving to rural areas where house prices are lower. Many look for support through belonging in the community.

Tourists and visitors: From the mass trespasses of the 1930s onwards urban Britons have been staking their own direct claim of belonging with regard to the countryside (Walker 2004: 82). Visitors come to what they see as “their” countryside. They take possession of it by walking unhindered over its land, by recording it photographically and by entering its premises. Their belonging is enhanced by adequate (preferably

free) car parks, waymarked and well-maintained footpaths, prepared attractions, public lavatories, gift shops and refreshment facilities. Visitors Books attest the significant role that the Parish Church often plays in enhancing their experience. For some who live in those areas that attract significant numbers of visitors the experience is one of invasion, especially where local facilities emphasise the belonging of tourists over residents (for example shops stocking gifts rather than basic commodities).

The British Public: The emergence of the Countryside Alliance at the end of the 1990s was a response to what some saw as interference by the national political apparatus into the rural way of life. Powerful feelings emerged on both sides in a battle over whether the countryside belongs to all of society or more exclusively to those who live in it. More recently the European Union has replaced production subsidies by the Single Farm Payment Scheme, which will increasingly require farmers to deliver environmental enhancement to priorities set by central government. This may in time prove to be one of the most profound assertions that the countryside belongs to the whole nation.

These examples of rural “belongers” demonstrate the potential for conflicts between different categories. When a planning application is made to replace an old house in large grounds by several smaller domestic properties it is welcome to those wishing to move into the community and to others looking for new friends or potential helpers in local causes, but not to those who fear it is an intrusion into their privacy, a diminution of their trophy or an act of vandalism to a piece of local heritage. Beyond the areas of conflict there are developments that encourage belonging among some groups that are at worst neutral or irrelevant to most others. Only the most partisan privacy seeker objects to improved public transport. Schemes to support higher employment levels or to encourage the development of small rural businesses are not usually divisive. In addition some institutions and activities in rural Britain continue to receive widespread support across most of the groups mentioned, and little objection from others. Village halls offer a venue for a wide range of events and activities. The rural school retains widespread support. A high percentage of the population expresses concern at proposals to declare the church redundant.

This characterisation of the range of stakeholders in the rural community demonstrates that belonging is a complex phenomenon. Some find accessible activities and institutions through which to express and effect their belonging. Others with an equally deep sense of belonging are either unable to engage with frequent participation in activities, or are not naturally inclined to express their belonging in such a way. To engage more deeply with how belonging is effected it is necessary to develop a theological model.

Belonging: a Theological Concept

From a Christian perspective the prime “belonging” relationship is with God. The Old Testament notion of the “People of God” is the best developed corporate understanding of what it is to belong. Indeed, without a developed sense of an afterlife it is the present belonging with God rather than the promise of a future destiny that lies to the fore. This belonging is expressed in many ways, from a series of covenants to the poetic and erotic language of the Song of Songs. God belongs with specific persons, such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Both the individual and corporate aspects

are developed in the New Testament. The Farewell Discourses of John 13-18 with their message of a mutual indwelling in love between God and the disciples are perhaps the most powerful expression of this belonging, but the concept is ubiquitous. This concept of belonging fits more naturally with the definitions of Francis and Robbins (2004) rather than those popularised by Davie (1994) which are centred on participation in activities. Key to all these biblical examples is the idea that belonging is not unidirectional but mutual. “We are your people and you are our God”.

From this divine belonging a fourfold natural belonging arises: belonging with people, activities, events and places. Again mutuality is an abiding factor. To speak of “belongings” is not simply to describe objects in ownership but to acknowledge two-way ties.

Belonging with people: The Children of Israel belong, in the Old Testament, not only with God but with each other. The Jewish Law seeks to manage this belonging, and the prophets repeatedly call the people to repentance for failing to maintain the standards of justice that such belonging requires. The Pastoral Epistles of the New Testament pick up the secular model of a “household”, built around a network of interpersonal relationships, and adopt it to construct the emerging notion of a church, with bishops, presbyters and deacons who both lead the community and model the Christian life for others. Several major denominations still define themselves as being those in communion with a particular senior bishop.

Belonging with activities: Activity, as it is understood today, is much less to the fore in the Bible. The Old Testament has its daily temple rituals performed by priests, but there is little that speaks of demands on individual Israelites for frequent and regular participation. By the time of Jesus the synagogue is a significant locus for activity, and the early disciples quickly pick up the pattern of weekly observance that remains familiar today. Paul’s various lists of spiritual gifts attest to a range of individuals regularly applying their skills to further the life of the church.

Belonging with events: The notion of expressing religious belonging through events is evident in the various covenant makings of ancient Israel as well as in the rites for circumcision, purification of women, and cleansing of lepers. Baptism lies to the fore as the main event based expression of religious affiliation in the early church. The notion of affirming religious identity at a variety of rites of passage builds on this over successive centuries.

Belonging with places: The importance of the land in ancient Israel is explored in detail by Brueggemann (2002). The author identifies that the Old Testament was not all about deeds, but was concerned with *place*, specific real estate that was invested with powerful promises.

And describes the

...dialectic in Israel’s fortunes between landlessness (wilderness, exile) and landedness, the latter either as possession of the land, as anticipation of the land or as grief about loss of the land

The notion of Jerusalem as a place of especial significance pervades the Jewish scriptures. Above all other land there is a special relationship with the particular place where someone lives. The Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 cover the purchase and sale of domestic properties, distinguishing carefully between homes in walled towns and

those in villages or open countryside. Whilst place features less centrally in the New Testament the early church soon begins to hallow particular locations such as the sites of martyrdoms. Meanwhile the eschatological vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in The Revelation of John draws Christians to identify themselves with a future place.

Belonging and the rural church

There are some who see “self-defined Christian affiliation” as at best a potential for being drawn into a “proper” faith, and others who consider it as a hindrance to or vaccination against evangelism. Against this Thomas (2003: 7) distinguishes between “participant” and “associate” membership and warns the church against a policy of working solely to maintain the former whilst ignoring the latter. He remarks on how people choose to identify with “brands and ideas” rather than “groups and meetings” and notes that successful organisations are often those that “enable us to support them without requiring our participation in the organisations themselves”.

The stance of this paper is that belonging as a theological concept is sufficiently powerful to demand the church pays full attention to it, both responding appropriately to its manifestations and promoting it at various levels of its work. By doing so the belonging of far more than the 7-8% of the population who reportedly attend a church on Sunday (Brierley 2001) can be described. The importance of this can be seen from the 2001 National Census returns showing over 70% of the UK population claiming to be Christian and the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2000 (De Graff & Need 2000) showing 52% profess to believe in God.

In this section rural church belonging is analysed under the four categories of activities, people, events and places, developed above.

Belonging with activities

Activities are those things that take place on a regular and frequent basis, and where individuals are expected to engage not just on a specific occasion but with the series. So for example Sunday Services, Youth Groups, Home Fellowships, Mothers’ Union, Toddler Groups, and the Parochial Church Council meetings are examples of church run activities, by contrast Christmas Services, Baptisms, Funerals, Garden Fetes and concerts are categorised here as events.

Taking part in activities requires a significant investment of time and energy. It is not unusual in a rural community to find the same individuals maintaining a variety of them. It is often those who like activities who run the events, maintain the buildings and act as the significant individuals in the community. Some activity led people grumble that others don’t join in as much as they should, or deprecate the genuineness of a belonging that isn’t activity based.

Amongst the categories that have been identified full timers are likely activists. Along with them are some lifestyle shifters, established residents and the arriving vulnerable. Some commuters are inclined to activity if it can be planned to fit in with their time constraints. If trophy owners are involved they are probably more interested in running activities than participating. Those who come to visit, travellers passing through and individuals forced to live away are, along with privacy seekers the least likely to take part either through lack of opportunity or lack of desire. There are also

many in the more obvious catchment groups for whom activity is not their mode of belonging.

Activities on the whole are not hugely contested. Those who do not wish to involve themselves don't take part. An exception is Sunday worship, where one person's preferred style and timing may conflict with another's.

Belonging with people

Within the rural community the church has its lay and ordained ministers and officers. These are individuals who are associated in the minds of those they meet with the church. What they do is, to a greater or lesser extent, seen as the church doing it. Some hold formal office, as clergy, churchwardens, readers, or members of a local ministry team. Others are simply recognised for what they do: visiting, flower arranging, organising events.

The same groups that are most likely to produce activists are also most likely to include those who belong to the rural church or rural institutions through people. However, because relationships of this nature are often built up over a considerable period of time there is a skewing of those who belong in this way towards longer term residents.

Belonging with people offers a route for those who for reasons of time or distance are not taking part in regular activities. For many missing vulnerable and absent friends the most significant way of sustaining belonging is through key people visiting them in their places of exile, or inviting them to visit in turn. Where visiting is not possible, regular letters, parish magazines or telephone conversations can have a vital part to play. For some commuters it is more practicable to retain relationships with significant individuals than to fit in with the relatively less flexible diary of a regular activity. Those passing through or seeking privacy are unlikely to have or generate belongings in this way.

Conflict in this area of belonging arises through personality clashes and through competition between individuals for recognition, authority and status. One example is of tension between newer arrivals with enthusiasm to run things, and those who have traditionally been focal for belonging in the community, where the latter express gratitude for the new energy of incomers but feel marginalised by them.

Belonging with events

Most rural churches undertake a range of events that engender belonging. The occasional offices are crucial. They express a belonging with the church and with God at key moments in the lives of the individuals directly concerned. They place the church at the centre of how a network of friends, relatives and neighbours expresses its belonging together. Major festivals such as Christmas and Harvest allow a belonging with the Christian story to be expressed and enacted. Concerts, Fetes, Garden Parties and social events offer a belonging together in the community, with the church acknowledged as having an explicit part in that belonging.

Some communities engender a significant amount of belonging through secular events that are not part of an organisation with wider aims. The well dressings of rural Derbyshire and the Open Garden weekends of Worcestershire are examples. Often the

church or its core membership plays a central role in arranging and promoting such events. They illustrate that there can be two levels of belonging going on at the same time. There is a basic level of belonging with rural life offered to those who visit the events. At the same time there is a deeper sense of belonging engendered in many of those who plan and deliver such occasions.

Because they are essentially “one-off”, events allow a different and wider range of people to be involved. They are not the main aspect of belonging for those who are activists, some of whom disparage event based belonging. However they offer the main way of belonging to longer term residents who are not otherwise active.

Public events such as Fetes allow individuals to express support without making an ongoing commitment. They attract absent friends and vulnerable missing. Tourists and visitors are often drawn to them. One of the trickiest issues may be identifying appropriate means of communication so that those who would want to come know that the event is happening. Churches are traditionally poor at maintaining contact with those who live outside of the parish unless they are regular worshippers.

Occasional offices are legally public but are seen by most as essentially private affairs, directed towards the invited guests of those concerned. Each of these rites brings with it areas of contention. The practice of pressing for baptisms to be held during a regular Sunday main service is a good example of the activist seeking to enforce their own understanding on event-belongers. The current residence requirements within the marriage preliminaries threaten the belonging of travellers, absent friends and the missing vulnerable. Clergy who use their discretion not to offer Archbishop’s Licences, or who restrict the availability of marriage services in the case where a participant is divorced are also denying belonging, as are those who refuse the funerals of non-residents. Where the rites are made generally available they provide belonging for members of every group mentioned in our earlier list. Even the privacy seeker may be drawn to hold a family occasion in the church.

Belonging with places

In many rural communities the church and churchyard are the most significant spaces in terms of contributing to belonging. Rural churches are almost invariably the oldest, or among the oldest, buildings in the area. One of their functions is to stand as a symbol of permanence amidst a society of change. That permanence looks backwards in providing a sense of belonging to the heritage of the community – and makes the church the natural location for memorials to significant persons, institutions or events. It also looks forwards, for example expressing in stone and wood the permanence that a couple are seeking when they make their marriage vows.

The church is often the visual symbol of the identity of the village, and as such features on any community website, memorabilia etc. Parish churches are also seen by many outside the Christian faith as being “spiritual space”. They use the church as somewhere holy to come and be quiet whilst they undertake their own spiritual journey, which does not recognise a need for liturgies, doctrine or ministers.

The churchyard affirms the belonging both of those who lie beneath its surface and of the community who remember them. Indeed the expectation that it will be there in future to receive ones own remains offers belonging to the living.

Belonging with the place matters to just about all of our categories. It is often the most important tie for those who are not resident. It is also the point where the wider belonging by the public in general is asserted; a belonging chiefly focussed on the preservation of heritage. The faculty jurisdiction system recognises a range of individuals, whose belonging with the church must be taken into account, giving them rights of petition and objection. Diocesan Advisory Committees involve the amenity societies representing a range of specific interests. English Heritage has the dual roles of both offering critical comment on proposals and providing core funding for restoration work. This may conflict with the desires of the present congregation to make the building congenial for present uses, and to economise on construction costs.

There is a link between belonging with place and belonging with events in that place. Events are for many the primary way through which belonging to place is expressed. The church building which has hosted generations of a family's rites of passage is hallowed by that history and also by the promise of its future availability. However it is important not to collapse places back into events. Schemes for the internal re-ordering of churches, to make both activities and events more comfortable, and more resonant with current worship styles, often fall foul of this. Once a place has become sacred then any alteration to it runs the risk of being seen as sacrilege. A good demonstration that it is the building rather than the event which carries this status can be seen in the much more positive attitude that those who belong through place or event are seen to have with regard to modern liturgies, wedding marches and funeral music than to the re-ordering of buildings.

Place belonging in the churchyard can be contentious when space is short and restrictive criteria are introduced. But by far the most frequent cause of conflict is over monuments. Having the gravestone one wants, in the churchyard one wants it and being able to plant, tend, edge or otherwise mark out the grave space plays a central role in many a grieving family's assertion of belonging with their deceased. However, a totally unregulated graveyard, subject both to the whims of individuals and competitive demonstrations of mourning, detracts from the belonging of the wider community, including the heritage interests.

Conclusions

This paper sets out to demonstrate that geographical belonging still matters. There are powerful forces in the formation of church policy that assert that modern society has lost its roots of belonging and that networks giving identity are more significant. This leads some to suggest that the parochial system, giving each a place of belonging according to residence, has now become superfluous; that the provisions for ministry, including church, parsonage and minister, should be relocated or assigned to new tasks relating to the fluid and unpredictable networks.

Currently the Government is showing fresh interest in the potential contribution of faith groups to local regeneration and other positive aspects of community life. It would be important for the rural Church to maintain its place in rural life at the time when more might be expected of it, rather than allowing a view from the urban experience to sacrifice its place in rural life.

It would be important to conduct further research to examine some of these assertions before dispensing with valuable and possibly irreplaceable assets. A number of counter claims have been set out in this paper that also need examining. Issues that merit further inquiry include the value that rural residents, whether commuter or indigenous, place on the local church and the worship and prayer for which it provides; the significance of the burial ground to local people; the contribution of local faith groups to community vibrancy; the possibilities that come with the development of local ministry; the potential for local faith groups to make a full contribution to the inclusivity of the rural society.

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