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# Encounters on the Edge



no. 27:  
**The Village  
and Fresh  
Expressions**

Is rural different?

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## The Village and Fresh Expressions

### Is rural different?

#### Why only now?

For years, I have been asked by friends to write a rural *Encounters on the Edge* and that pressure has grown since the publication of *Mission-shaped Church*. This is not least because of the brevity of its rural section<sup>1</sup> and the paucity of rural stories. Partly, I hesitated because of my own history. I am a “townie” who enjoys the countryside via TV programmes and only actually goes there as an appreciative, but probably still romantic, tourist. Part of my response to friends has been to ask for genuinely rural stories that could be told. What I have now met in Devon and Norfolk fits the bill. Importantly, the stories are different from each other. I doubt there is one way forward for rural expressions and begin to see why. This issue and the next try to do justice to them and their context.

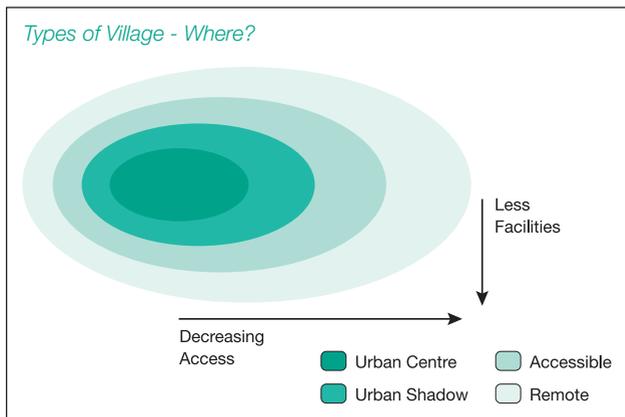


*Saxlingham Memorial*

<sup>1</sup>*Mission-shaped Church* CHP 2004 p.118-120

# What is Rural?

Types of Village - Where?



As I read classic texts on rural ministry, they began to dispel some ignorance. I learnt there are many ways to classify differences within what is rural, or countryside. Some use a model of **concentric rings**, measuring proximity to urban population centres; Russell speaks of *urban shadow*, *accessible countryside*, *less accessible countryside* and

*remote marginal countryside*.<sup>2</sup> With each successive kind, the proportion of culturally urban people and commuters reduces, as the travel distance (not simply the mileage) from a centre increases. The nearest ring has few facilities, but doesn't need them because the nearby town provides. Moving outwards, the good facilities that exist in the second band (accessible) steadily and severely diminish. The rings further out also experience depopulation because of these forms of poverty. Since his book, which included market towns within his definition of rural, the Government have decreed that for development funding purposes, settlements of over 10,000 are no longer rural. Thus, numbers of market towns, which are crucial within rural economies, will have to compete for funding for their own regeneration with deprived areas.<sup>3</sup> For this issue, I have excluded examples of fresh expressions both in urban shadow settlements and market towns.

Another way to classify rural contexts is by **major economic function** and Osborne cites five, some of which need a comment to unpack the dynamics of the label.<sup>4</sup> *Farming or Fishing* communities he finds have a long history, hierarchical life with dominant families and implicit rules. *Industrial* includes both "model" textile communities and pit villages, where common danger,

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Russell *The Country Parish* SPCK 1986 p.3

<sup>3</sup> *Country Way* 2004 Issue 37 p.3

<sup>4</sup> Barry Osborne *The Key To Effective Rural Evangelism* Rural Sunrise 2nd Edition 1997 pp.10-12

Types of Village - Why?

WORK	REST	PLAY
Farming and Fishing	Commuter	Resort
Industrial	Newly built	

intermarriage and now massive unemployment are notable features. *Commuter* villages are what they sound, with professional, articulate weekenders and little real social life. Tourist outsiders and second homeowners equally dominate *Resort* villages, where social reality occurs only in winter. Lastly, he cites *New* villages that are instant mini towns, but which as artificially created, can suffer from social problems and the term "village" is more of a market play than sustained social reality.

These two ways of looking at what is rural are broadly complementary and I would think of using both. The second also highlights that rural does not necessarily mean agricultural, though not all agree with the last point.<sup>5</sup> **The creation of fresh expressions of church needs always to be contextually aware, so different types of rural are highly important.**

*different types of rural are highly important.*

## Are urban and rural different?

Despite the admitted physical distances from urban centres, Russell argues that, culturally, the urban/rural divide is a myth in two ways. Firstly, the prevalence of modern media means, "everyone lives in an urban and industrial mass culture".<sup>6</sup> My comment is that then the issue in the countryside becomes whether low wages can meet the now universal aspirations of consumerism and whether high transport costs and time can give access to its allurements. Another real difference between urban and rural is spatial distribution and population density. **Rural life offers space, but urban offers facilities.** Osborne offers another difference in relation to implicit theologies of church and belonging. In a rural context, the church belongs to the people; in urban settings, people talk about belonging to church - or not.<sup>7</sup> This reflects deep differences between parochial and gathered understandings of church and community.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Bowden *Ministry in the Countryside* Mowbray 1994 p.66

<sup>6</sup> Russell op. cit. p.5

<sup>7</sup> Barry Osborne op. cit. p.61

The other dimension Russell raises is that, with the rise of the motorcar, villages are no longer physically isolated, providing the labour force for the local farm. “*Modern rural settlements have become communities of choice*”.<sup>8</sup> The word communities, in the plural, is important and there is some agreement that rural settlements can include three different social groupings. Russell describes them as the *Farmers*, the *Old Villagers* and the *New Villagers*<sup>9</sup>.

## Who's out there in the countryside?

### The farming community

The *Farmers* even twenty years ago would be less than 20% of the settlement's population and continues to fall, by the march of mechanisation and the drain of those leaving the industry. England tends to farm stock in the west and arable in the east, but across both, farmers find attitudes to them from others have changed. The positive image of the well-meaning and prosperous farmer of the 1950s, seen out driving his Rover, had soured by the 1970s and they were more seen as rich exploiters, de-hedgers, and factory farmers. Bowden adds further issues that changed their image with others: healthy eating, organic farming, animal rights and biodiversity.<sup>10</sup> Both think the farmers have therefore retreated more into their own world, outside the present-day village.

The pressures on them are massive. More recent official church reports<sup>11</sup> assert that a large number of businesses have not been viable for some time, not least due to an enforced inability to cover their commodity production costs in the face of supermarket pricing<sup>12</sup>, and consequences of the review of the EU's infamous CAP. On my rural visits, I heard of increased pressure of work, due to having to lay off workers and take on their jobs, high suicide rates and marital breakdowns.<sup>13</sup> The Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001 perhaps focussed the critical need for debate about what the countryside is for, what agricultural activity and policies are needed and what is ecologically

<sup>8</sup> Russell op. cit. p.65 ff

<sup>9</sup> Russell op. cit. pp. 105-171

<sup>10</sup> Bowden op. cit. pp.19-20

<sup>11</sup> *Renewing Faith in the Countryside* GS 1418 CHP 2001 paragraph 6

<sup>12</sup> *Renewing Faith in the Countryside* paragraph 42, citing milk in which suppliers only received around 75% of the production costs per litre.

<sup>13</sup> Conversations with Mandy Wright CA in North Devon.

sustainable.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps along with concern about “Mad Cow Disease”, it produced an equivocal response to farmers; on the one hand creating real appreciation of their suffering, but a deep questioning of practices that could escalate into these problems, including significant loss of jobs in the overall rural economy, especially tourism.

### Traditional village people

The *Old Villagers* are defined by where they live in the village and tend not to move, remaining in farm cottages or council property. They know who they are by kinship, with little social visiting outside the family and the women maintaining the traditions and providing leadership. Jobs could be in construction, driving, highways and farm working, but there is also unemployment, difficulty in finding jobs for the young and low wages with high costs, in transport and access to services. Another strand are the landed families, often enclosed on their own property and in one sense outside the village physically, though their roles inside may be significant. Similarly, the professional classes like the doctor, policeman, teacher and even clergyman are now often non-resident. Old Villagers value place; belonging is a matter of identification. Those who have moved between villages, but have been rural all their lives, still conform to these norms.<sup>15</sup>

### The Incomers

The *New Villagers*, by contrast, see belonging as coming through participation. The two have therefore markedly different views of church attitude and attendance. The incomers have been arriving since the passing of the 1960s zenith of urban confidence. From the 1970s, people have been in flight from violence, loss of community in neighbourhoods and attendant alienation. That drift continues.<sup>16</sup> **This group is the growing proportion in most kinds of villages.** In themselves, they are diverse. They may be upwardly mobile, young families, weekenders, empty nesters or retirees.<sup>17</sup> It may be true that they have mainly moved out to Russell's nearest three concentric rings and not to the remote areas

*Incomers are the growing proportion in most kinds of villages.*

<sup>14</sup> *Renewing Faith in the Countryside* paragraph 41

<sup>15</sup> Romantic illusions about the rural idyll are identified and shattered by both the opening chapters of Bowden and Russell.

<sup>16</sup> *Renewing Faith in the Countryside* CHP 2001 paragraph 40

<sup>17</sup> Russell op. cit. p.67 Retirement migration is seen as the most significant demographic factor.

in such numbers. Across the Osborne classifications, their least-favoured move would be to the industrial. They often have strong views; they are active and articulate and know how to influence things. This has changed community from being a matter of blood and history to the recent concoction of voluntary associational activity. Another key difference is highlighted in Bowden.<sup>18</sup> For the first two groups, the countryside is where they work or worked, but **for the new villagers, it is the place of leisure or recreation.** The latter have retired or they work elsewhere. Devotees of the BBC sit-com *To The Manor Born* will quickly make connections.

That a village may contain these three significantly different groups with differing histories, agendas, values and channels of communication raises profound issues when seeking to help an existing church to mature or to thrive. It is also a significant background in considering starting any kind of fresh expression. **It is almost inconceivable to imagine one expression**

**of church that could truly appeal to all three kinds of villager.**

**That could also be true across the diversity of incomers.**

However, the beauty of the *Mission-shaped Church* climate is that it includes a celebration of diversity. I noted a Catholic writer in *Country Way* coming to the same conclusion by warmly relating it to changes in thinking about the church, emanating from Vatican II and echoed in the writing of Rowan Williams.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>18</sup> Bowden pp.18-19

<sup>19</sup> 2004 Father Kevin O'Connell Issue 37 p.24

## What has happened to the Rural Church?

### Down but not out?

In a word, it has declined. In a 2004 Christian Research paper comparing 1989 and 1998 attendance figures, Peter Brierley splits the returns between two categories of rural, which he terms Commuter and Remoter. The decline in commuter rural church was 30%, and in remote areas 63%. He thinks that between 1998 and 2010 both rates of decline will increase.<sup>20</sup>

To some extent, the rural church has been expiring of expectations that could not be fulfilled. There is an impossible idyll of each village with its own vicar, vicarage and church or, as Bowden phrases it, *"there is a parson shaped hole in every parish."*<sup>21</sup> The combination of factors bringing decline was fearsome: depopulation of the more remote areas, ordinations not keeping pace with retirements despite the invention of non-stipendiary ministry, doubling of Reader numbers in the same period and significant dependence on the retired clergy.<sup>22</sup> The costs of deploying clergy increased and shifted to being born locally, not centrally, as economic inflation eroded historic income. Moreover, since the 1974 introduction of the Sheffield Formula, clergy were redistributed in favour of urban populations. All these brought **the reduction in rural clergy, which is "the chief change."**<sup>23</sup> In

the mid-1980s, the change was seen as savage; *"in the last twenty years we have done a hatchet job of Beeching proportions on the village church."*<sup>24</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Peter Brierley *Rural Churches Today and Tomorrow* Christian Research Paper 2004 Table 4

<sup>21</sup> Bowden op. cit. p.47

<sup>22</sup> Leslie Francis *Rural Anglicanism – A Future For Young Christians* Collins 1985 pp 12-26. The book is based around research in one unnamed rural Diocese.

<sup>23</sup> Russell op. cit. p.236

<sup>24</sup> Archbishop Robert Runcie 1987 cited in Bowden p.33

## What showed the decline?

There were several attendant indicators of this decline of influence and central presence. Leslie Francis spelt them out.<sup>25</sup> More churches became locked, which sent an obvious message. Rectories were sold off which Bowden saw as iconic of the loss of the central status of Anglicanism in village life, as well as the downgrading of the status of rural clergy, not just their distribution.<sup>26</sup> After the Plowden report in 1967<sup>27</sup>, Church of England small village primary schools became disused, with too few teachers and pupils to fulfil contemporary educational requirements. Many services became no longer weekly but monthly<sup>28</sup>, creating a context which demanded esoteric knowledge to find them, discouraged that favoured Anglican bird of passage, the casual attender, and created patterns of irregular attendance as an unwelcome norm in spirituality. Francis summed up:

*“The Church of England was able to regard itself as a majority movement representing a majority culture, especially in rural society. Plainly this assumption no longer holds... Now it is a very small minority regularly touching only 4% of the population living in a rural diocese.”*<sup>29</sup>



Augustinian Priory Ruins

Other denominations have fared worse in terms of buildings still open. The independent free churches have vanished the most. Methodism with its circuit policy still has strength in some regions. However, in many villages only the Anglican buildings are left. **As a consequence, there is a de facto ecumenism<sup>30</sup> that has been broadly welcomed.** The level of discouragement has been high. *“The Church of England faces extinction in*

<sup>25</sup> Francis p.12

<sup>26</sup> Bowden p.27

<sup>27</sup> Russell p.85

<sup>28</sup> Francis p.51 20% of churches had no service at all on any given Sunday.

<sup>29</sup> Francis p.42

<sup>30</sup> *Renewing Faith in the Countryside* paragraph 18, 31 and Appendix A – suggestions and guidelines for more inclusive worship, involvement and shared aspects of ministry, when the Anglican church is the only one left in a village.

*the countryside in the next twenty years”.*<sup>31</sup> But we now know this stark prediction did not happen. What did?

## Responses to decline

Various new patterns of ministry have been tried, all of which significantly conflict with both the traditional rural image and past Anglican conviction that church is parson, parish and building. This adjustment is still being worked through. As we watch in 2005, perhaps the less enduring options are being withdrawn, but adjustment palpably continues toward the best compromise. This settling process is severely complicated by ideological commitments to differing patterns across the dioceses. This is the backdrop to all contemporary rural fresh expressions of church.

### A. Collaborative Ministry

This is a broad trend across the country. Beneath it is a change of conviction about church and so also about ministry. Bowden credits the Tiller Report of 1983 as encapsulating the two dynamics: firstly, the local congregation is the basic building block of the church and, secondly, baptism is the ordination of the laity for local ministry.<sup>32</sup> This is a shift to an ecclesiology centred in church as The People of God. Church is no longer centred in the presence of either the building or the parson. It is also in significant tension with some inclusive understandings of parish, because it is intrinsic that the people of God only have that identity because they are called.<sup>33</sup> Election to become Christian precedes selection to exercise ministry. Election also confronts soft universalism. It suggests that **belonging without consequences of either believing or behaving is generous nonsense.** Furthermore, as Newbigin made explicit, election is dangerous unless it is clear that the calling is for missionary existence, not proud identity, as the text in 1 Peter chapter 2 shows.<sup>34</sup> It is also in conflict psychologically with both clericalism and, its collusive partner, lay dependency.<sup>35</sup> These powerful and well-established patterns have gained quasi-theological status as “Vicar knows best”, with

<sup>31</sup> *Church Times* 7th June 1985 cited by Russell p.235

<sup>32</sup> Bowden p.29

<sup>33</sup> See 1 Peter Ch 2 vss. 9-12

<sup>34</sup> Lesslie Newbigin *The Household of God* SCM 1953 Ch.6, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* SPCK 1989 Ch.7

<sup>35</sup> Bowden p.175 wonders if Clergy want lay ministry. He senses the head battle might be won to help the church survive, but not their hearts.

parish seen as ownership not responsibility. Having gained such an impressive list of enemies, it is therefore not surprising that collaborative ministry often began reluctantly. It was seen as regrettable necessity that gained the status of expedient strategy. The history of non-stipendiary ministry since 1970 is described as “cautious and clericalist”<sup>36</sup> and I agree. Even some forms of lay ministry look more like clericalising rather than releasing lay people to be different. Should there ever be a massive upturn in ordained vocations, all offered free, I would watch with interest.

## B. Minster or Supermarket Church

I don't know which was the seminal thought here, but I see various strands. The secular parallel was to watch village corner shops closing but the SPAR in the larger village still going, or to look to the market town as a centre for an area. The Methodists for a time went this way. They had inherited a problem of too many small buildings after reunifications that followed splits in earlier centuries. The policy became to close small local chapels and ask people to come together to form critical mass, or joinable churches. The hope was that the larger church would be the resource that in time might re-launch outstations. Conversations I have had with Methodist leaders tell me one third of the people simply stopped going anywhere, one third stayed local but transferred (usually to the Anglicans) and only one third complied. The proposal actually created more decline and this has been learnt from. In addition, circuits work differently from deaneries in that, in Methodism, the task of pastoral care is seen as the responsibility of the congregation, but in Anglicanism it belongs to the clergy, though now to some degree delegated to authorised laity. In that sense, **mini-regional minster was foreign to the inherited dynamics of Anglican, parochial, pastoral ministry.** Another strand is Tiller who also saw stipendiary clergy as working across a deanery in a role of oversight and training, but usually working out of a *minster*-type church. It was both this separation of clergy from immediate locality, and some hesitancy that deanery rather than parish was the building block, that became the cause of rejection of his 1983 proposals. The work of Christopher Donaldson and similar practice of ADAPs in Catholic northern France also leant in this direction.<sup>37</sup> This idea, which Donaldson took back to

<sup>36</sup> Russell p.254-5

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Donaldson *The New Springtime of the Church* Canterbury Press 1992. ADAP stands for Assembly Dominicale en Absence du Pretre and was notable in Evreux Diocese with 45 examples. The Agricultural Chaplain in Canterbury Diocese, Jesse Sage, wrote a thesis on them. The Sheffield Centre has a copy.

2nd century practice, saw the local region clergyman as Bishop (in function) with local leaders as the presbyterate and an administrator acting as the deacon. Once again, the deanery was the unit and the leading church a *minster*. I hear few rural advocates of it these days, partly because deanery boundaries are often too large to give local identity. Their workings are experienced as artificial organisational groupings that lack pastoral or missiological conviction.<sup>38</sup> In some rural areas, there are no candidates for *minster*. When they exist it can create dependency not sustainability and, in France, experiments closed with local people wanting the priest back, not the laity who had led in their absence. My parting comment is that **theoretical views that promote church seen as translocal seem always to conflict with practical arguments that it is first local.**

## C. Team Ministries

Particularly since the Paul Report of 1964, some took collaborative ministry to mean clergy working together, not solely. The strand is traceable further back to 1952 and a team created in Lincoln Diocese.<sup>39</sup> The value of support, sharing responsibility and discovering varied gifts is good sense. However, Bowden is quite critical. They create as many problems as they solve, for clergy are lukewarm about them, they are prey to personality problems, they suffer from autocratic Team Rectors, and Team Vicars seeing them as stepping stones to having their own patch.<sup>40</sup> Lack of a commonly owned vision also creates tension and saps energy. Making several churches into one parish is also feared as the thin end of the wedge toward the loss of a building and it erodes the sense of place that parish endorses. Moreover, the existence of the clergy team, and the energy to make that work, seems to prevent the growth of lay teams in each place, which might be more important. Today, I hear more advocacy of disbanding teams than the reverse.



<sup>38</sup> Russell p.241-242 notes Bishop Samuel Wilberforce began them in the mid 19th century as his communication channels. Is this an interesting case of a dominant gene in the DNA of an ecclesial organism?

<sup>39</sup> Russell p.238

<sup>40</sup> Bowden pp.110-12

## D. The Multi Parish Benefice

What has emerged as the leading practice is the retention of parish status, but grouping them in a benefice. Twenty years ago the average number of parishes to benefice was six. I expect Bob Jackson's next book to have comment on both the optimum number and whether this has been empirically derived not merely expediently concocted. There can be tensions in the arrangement. Russell thinks clergy favour the centralisation of church life, shown in benefice events, while the laity favour local, meaning parish. Bowden notes the historical irony that the benefice arrangement "*in any other generation has been called plurality and roundly condemned*".<sup>42</sup>

The positive aspects include that it takes significant lay involvement to make it work, on the assumption that one aim is provision of one service in each church every Sunday. **Lay leadership is the great gain in the longer rural story.** Another helpful factor is that parish remains a working church unit, retaining linkage of place and ministry. At best, clergy then take on roles of oversight, helping each church define and set its goals, calling local ministries into being, providing insight and knowledge and taking ultimate responsibility.<sup>43</sup>

The negative factors include clergy having to attend large numbers of administrative meetings (say, six PCCs) and the tendency for those parishes in which the clergy are not resident to become satellites and thus to experience numerical decline.<sup>44</sup> The assumption can still be that clergy do ministry and, as they are short-handed, the laity assist them. Bowden sees the clergy's historic roles as holy, learned, local (in the sense of being known) and apostolic.<sup>45</sup> However by the last word he does not mean missionary, which would be my understanding, but rather catholic, in the sense of coming from and representing the wider church. In a day of highly educated lay people, I now see little reason why the first three factors could not be modelled by gifted indigenous laity.

<sup>41</sup> Russell p.243

<sup>42</sup> Bowden p.26

<sup>43</sup> Russell p.261

<sup>44</sup> Bowden pp.116-120

<sup>45</sup> Bowden p.167ff

## Unlocked potential

In addition to changes in patterns of ministry, there are other valuable responses that heed the indicators of decline identified by Leslie Francis in the mid-1980s. More churches are no longer locked. There is a strong trend not only to keep churches open, but a desire to make fuller use of them during the week. This is not a mere revenue search, but engagement with regenerating rural community. *Country Way* celebrates and champions the return of churches to medieval patterns of secular community use, facing down misplaced notions of a separated holiness. It tells of openings as satellite Post Offices, Tourist Information centres for the Hidden Britain movement and even a weekly Farmers market.<sup>46</sup>

More parsonages are being occupied by a priest, who may be retired, NSM, OLM, part-time, or as a house for duty appointment. Once again, there is a parson person in more villages. There is also recognition that services less than weekly are a perilous path. It is better to provide simple but sustainable weekly lay-led services of the word, with Eucharist less frequently, than to operate with the priest as a whirling dervish eucharistic machine, flying round the benefice, parachuting in for the magic words, splitting the integrity of word and sacrament and unable to build pastoral contacts.



## The rural church continues past a sell-by date

It has proved more enduring than its friends feared or its critics prophesied. The gains are real: the priority of the local, the released ministry of the lay, clergy learning to equip not just do, and ecumenical convergence. Perhaps there is also more realism that the idyll of parson in each place will not happen. Church has changed. **An irony is that now it is facing population growth in the countryside.**

*The irony is that a weaker church is facing population growth in the countryside.*

<sup>46</sup> *Country Way* 2004 Issue 37 with varied stories on pp.4 - 11

Yet it is weaker in its ability to face that challenge than in the past, because of less clergy, more ageing congregations and more expensive buildings.<sup>47</sup> What I saw in my visits early this summer confirmed these broad patterns of churches seeking wider usage by the community, lay ministries being set free, parsonages occupied once more and weekly simple services. Will it be enough?

### The end for some?

**The rural church in some places is greying to an alarming extent.** On holiday, by chance I met a church treasurer, whose family had long been pillars of the church in generations past. He admitted he had taken on the role more out of dynastic inheritance than dynamic faith. As a fellow sailor, he conveyed the pressure that I had heard about in my visits in the nautical language of *“I don’t want it to close down on my watch.”* There was both resilience and resignation in the comment, from a local church facing death. On my visit to the Holsworthy Deanery of Exeter Diocese, I found it had 23 churches. The lay chair, Chris Hebron, showed me their statistics. 9 have congregations of less than 12. In these smaller churches, the elderly predominate. What is their future? In the village of Ashwater, a local lay Methodist, Maggie Elliott, told me that, in the corresponding circuit, only 3 out of 13 chapels were not struggling, in what was Methodist heartland 50 years ago. Occasionally, a keen Methodist moving to the area would try her local chapel with its 10-12 people. But its low numbers and atmosphere of departed glory sent its own messages of doubt and decline. Something can be too small to be worth joining. Maggie commented that they don’t stay, so there is no prospect of replacement, even by transfer. The question “is it time to close?” is a live one. I haven’t done the statistical work, but from anecdotal evidence I could imagine that rural and inner urban church face some similarities at this point. Dying churches and churches being renewed exist relatively close to one another.

### Rural Fresh Expressions

I have spent this long on what is rural and how church has adapted there because of two convictions. One is that I have not yet met a summary of the rural context; it is either assumed or spelt out at the length of a serious

book. I hope this brief backdrop may help others as much as it has already helped me to explore it.

The other conviction is that context is vital to creating fresh expressions. **The church planting process must identify how a culture works and then go with the grain of that** in seeking to inculcate both gospel and church. In the countryside, there is the further missionary complication that this is quite the reverse of a fresh mission field, devoid of expectations about church. **Christendom values, inside and outside the churches, are still tussling with post-Christendom realities.** It shows in patterns of ministry which themselves are shaped by the social climate of expectations. This is heightened in that villages are places in which if you sneeze at one end, someone at the other end will say, “bless you”.<sup>48</sup> I was not surprised to read in *Country Way*, Barry Osborne’s assessment from serious study that very little rural church planting had been done and in his words *“how difficult it was”*.<sup>49</sup> For example, the stories in the rare 1991 Church Growth Booklet called *Rural Church Planting* tend to be replants into a rural context out of nearby urban churches. It is not impossible, but has all sorts of cultural and missionary hazards. I wanted to find something home grown.

<sup>47</sup> See Osborne p.53

<sup>48</sup> See Osborne p.47

<sup>49</sup> *Country Way* 2004 Issue 37 p.18

## Sunday 4.6 - hope in north Devon

### The backdrop

Broadly speaking in Exeter Diocese, the larger south Devon coastal town churches subsidise the poorer, more remote, northern villages. Holsworthy Deanery is such a rural area, between Bideford to the north and Launceston to the south. **Holsworthy** is home to the local cattle and pannier market. The town is some 3000, while the whole deanery serves a population of 10711. There are 21 churches in use, 2 others being closed. Electoral Rolls total 332, with attendance 284, so the average congregation is 13.5. Yet 3.48% of the population attend, a reminder that percentage attendance in rural areas is higher than urban ones. Staffing is 3 incumbents, augmented by one house-for-duty priest, two active retirees and three active readers.



Holsworthy

The area is a mix of livestock farmers who are struggling financially in the current climate. The area is off the tourist trail, so that source of other income is not available to them and local businesses. The incomers are mainly retirees, as there are few jobs, so there are few children. Even some incomers don't stay, finding the rural idyll softer than the harder reality. Lack of facilities, longer travelling times and deep quiet being more disturbing than they thought, seem to be the reasons why they leave.

Mandy Wright is a Church Army Evangelist working in this deanery. Church Army and the Diocese jointly fund her post, which began in July 2003. The title is a mouthful but descriptive. She is the Deanery Evangelist and Archdeaconry of Barnstaple Mission Enabler. As a Bishop's appointment, the Diocese commendably invested in a suitable house. For her wider mission work, including *Sunday 4.6*, she is accountable to the Bishop of Crediton.

**Her own background is rural** and, after a career in the police and before training for Church Army, she worked as the assistant estate manager at Lee Abbey.



Mandy and Brandy

The first year was difficult. Her trying to get inside the farming community was resisted. Perhaps being a woman in a notably man's world didn't help. Church life was not much more encouraging. It is extraordinary how small churches still have cathedral aspirations. Five people singing "*Oh for a thousand tongues*" may be a heartfelt prayer, but it is not a clever choice of music. **Attendance mentality militates against many helpful dynamics of church.** It reduces a sense of community, because people leave and don't mix afterwards. It stifles lay ministry at birth and colludes with "Father knows best" attitudes (though these days it can be Mother). It is buttressed by a view that parishioners have a right to services and a vicar, but no obligation to pay the wicked tax called Common Fund to enable this. The wider community also play these games but they religiously only ever come at set festivals. Mandy spoke about it in her zesty way:

*Attendance mentality militates against many helpful dynamics of church.*

*"I started Sunday 4.6 (so named as it is held on the 4th Sunday of the month at 6pm) largely because of my frustration with the traditional rural churches in my very isolated area of Devon. The churches are mostly small, cold, elderly and some don't have any power and I'm talking here about the congregations as well as the buildings!*

*The people are traditional in their ways of life and worship. They come to church as observers and consumers rather than participants and are highly suspicious of newcomers – especially*

*if they want to change anything. There are age-old rivalries between villages and denominations. Some still bear a grudge because the next village supported the Roundheads during the civil war! Only 1 out of the 21 churches in my deanery gives any money away and there is much idolisation of the building. Given the age range of the congregations, and the fact that mission is a dirty word, most will die out within the next 20 years."*

The lay chairman, Chris Hebron, agreed that the church building was held as a status symbol, being more important than attending, making any notion of mission "desperately difficult to focus on". Creating a benefice was seen as an organisational imposition and people did not travel to its joint events, though ironically more rural people than ever own motorcars and have to use them to shop. I asked what future he saw in ten years' time. He imagined two scenarios; village church life would either have withered away or be very different with far fewer buildings, and finding a way to attract incomers.

### Taking some initiative

In such a context, trying to change existing patterns does not look promising. **One commonality across rural expressions seems to be that it is easier and better to grow something beside it.**<sup>50</sup> This avoids head-on conflict and prevents the scenario of some imposed new thing operating with a perpetual grumble in the background. That spirit is likely to sour it and will be off-putting to any newcomers. Moreover, starting something else means that those who do come are volunteers not conscripts; they are explorers not tacit protesters.

Mandy was glad to meet the odd kindred spirit in the search for a way forward. Jackie Galton and her husband, Nigel, moved as incomers to Clawton village in 2000. Though of Baptist background, they wanted to join the local church and the only choice was Anglican. Jackie, as a pianist, was asked to take over after the organist left. During an interregnum, wardens asked them both to take some services. Out of this, her desire to widen the music in worship to more contemporary and participative material became sharper. But there was no obvious outlet.

<sup>50</sup> A set of theological themes to buttress the notion of diversity is given in *Mission-shaped Church* p.20

Mandy and Jackie began to meet and now both recognize that without the other, *Sunday 4.6* would not have got off the ground. It was clear that to do something else, somewhere else, sometime else, beckoned, but what? In a traditional context, it was likely that *Sunday* was the day they assumed. Here the evening service is now a rare thing, so that left a space. They wanted a place that had toilets, was warm as supposed to cold, offered flexible non-reserved seating not defended pews and had an electrical system that could cope with a keyboard, amplifier and an urn, rather than candle power. So the Clawton Parish Hall looked useful. It was known, secular, simple, cheap at ten pounds a session, ecumenically neutral and not controlled by any local clergy person. As I also pointed out to them, because it was up the hill and



Jacqui Galton



Sunday 4.6 Team

round some bends from the village centre, it also had anonymity. **People could try it out without others knowing, which can be an advantage.** Invitations were by word of mouth and some posters, but it is doubtful how much the latter achieved. The events took some planning so they have settled, at present, for a monthly pattern. It takes time to choose a theme, contact various people to participate, find resources and draw up a rough order of an evening.

### What sort of values were they after in *Sunday 4.6*?

The way Jackie talked about it tallied with the aims written up by Mandy. The idea of "an alternative type of worshipping." was quite dominant. From conversation and observation, this means weaving rather different strands together. Partly it means a chance for Christians to recharge by



Sunday 4.6 Worship

immersing themselves in a diet of post-denominational, Spring Harvest and New Wine songs. It was as though they felt desiccated by formal denominational worship in a atmosphere of decline. By contrast at *Sunday 4.6*, members talked about being able “to concentrate on God”, “let themselves go”, or “free to be myself in worship”. This could sound highly consumerist, but could equally be seen as food for the journey of continuing to assist traditional church. **Sunday 4.6 gave them hope.**

It also meant drawing on instincts for significant participation. This value is common to at least alternative worship, cell, all-age worship and Taize worship, though they achieve it in different ways. Several of these strands have been drawn on; thus, over the months, quite a Catholic width of sources have been mined. Sometimes a simple wooden cross and a Bible are part of a centrepiece. Communion has taken place once, but having a president who understands its ethos matters. This desire to experiment with different ways of worshipping brings an emphasis on learning together, rather than having an ‘expert’ up front. There is often space and time for people to process what is being offered, **rather than the constant liturgical verbal barrage in formal church.** It seems to connect and surprise, as Mandy noted:

*“I was very encouraged when, after an Ignation-style meditation where people were invited to have a conversation with Jesus in their imaginations, a lady who had attended church all her life, said that she had met Christ for the very first time during that meditation.”*

**Participation** is seen as a yardstick of effectiveness and a value to live by. Everybody is encouraged to take an active part. This experimentation with worship has proved an uncomfortable journey for those Anglicans used to passive attendance, but they have stuck with it. Jackie commented that those they knew were really frightened the first time, but nine months later are beginning to open up. The Methodist and Baptist members thought

it was fairly usual, though these denominations have their own equivalents to clericalism too. To embed the value, there is a continuing emphasis on the ethos that “having a go” is more important than “getting it right”. Mercifully at the first meeting, Jackie inadvertently started playing the wrong tune for one song, but it only led to several people, including her, bursting out laughing. The tone had been set from the front. Mandy commented:

*“Participation has been the rule from day one. We have discussions during or instead of sermons, prayers usually involve some activity and people are now learning to pray out loud, as well as becoming comfortable with silence. There is always something to eat and drink afterwards. I am now working on people’s participation in leading the service and in promoting fellowship.”*

These comments open up the dimension of **community**. The challenges to overcome are the attendance mentality and the history of interdenominational competition and conflict. Classically, Methodist chapels were built some distance outside a village, on the land of a friendly farmer, because the Anglicans would not permit their physical presence. To create an inclusive form of multi-denominational church, where those of any Christian tradition or none can feel they belong, is a long task. It is not made easier by a monthly pattern, which so easily feels like occasional meeting, not church. Should that continue, the idea of small groups in between times might be highly significant, both for building a sense of community



Sunday 4.6 prayer



Preparing coffee

and continuity, but also to create a way in which disciples are grown, which is another stated value. The chance to apply insights being discovered at *Sunday 4.6* would be priceless. That idea exists on paper but is still to emerge in practice. From what I saw in Norfolk (see Encounters No 28), this is a crucial development that needs to find its own answers to make this a more compelling and rounded fresh expression of church in north Devon.

All fresh expressions of church face the task of **growing disciples**. They cannot be content with drawing a crowd, or with getting enough regulars to be taken seriously, or even becoming self-governing and self-financing. The issue is whether people are being encountered by Jesus, discovering his choice of them and choosing to follow him in response. That way, encountering him changes how they encounter others. If the loose word “spirituality” means starting and sustaining relationship with the living Christ, then it should and can overflow into the dynamics of community, mission,

worship and connection to the wider church. However good the worship, once a month is likely only to be a taster for such a deeper journey. If *Sunday 4.6* got stuck in its initial focus on worship and became seen as just another service, there is no reason to assume it would escape the curse of attendance mentality. **In that sense, a service in itself, wherever it is held, is not yet fully church.**

*In that sense, a service in itself, wherever it is held, is not yet fully church.*

The aims express the intention to be **accessible and welcoming** to non-churchgoers. How are they doing? Starting in September 2004, thus far the attendance rate has varied between 13 and 33, with an average up to July 2005 of 19. I note this is already 50% more than the average of the surrounding village churches, so some platform for the future is being built. Those who came when it started were a mixture of existing Methodists, Anglicans and Baptists. However, the monthly services are beginning to attract non-churchgoers, partly through invitation and also from contacts Mandy has, through speaking to various secular care groups and organisations. She notes the newcomers are much less reticent about asking their own friends and contacts. Mandy finds that the task of encouraging *Sunday 4.6* members to invite friends via written invitations is slow work. I wonder what may have to be devised as a half way house to *Sunday 4.6*. Granted the secular venue is a step in the *go* direction, its identity as a worship service, despite welcome creativity, informality and participation, still looks like a *come* shape in mission.

Maybe in the countryside there is a higher proportion of dechurched people for whom this is still a plausible strategy. The comments of Eve, a woman from the farming community, are enlightening. Mandy discovered through a year’s visiting that Eve had tried her local church but was put off by the lack of welcome. *Sunday 4.6* was different and she had described it as “*spiritual rather than religious*”,

which today is high praise. Should she come to profession of faith, all my instincts say this is the community into which she would be baptised, which would also test whether the Deanery recognise *Sunday 4.6* as church.



*Sunday 4.6 worship*

### Starting is not enough

**The missionary task is forming indigenous church, not simply renewing worship.** Mission is not mere spiritual advertising; it leads to the formation of baptised disciples. Maturity is partly measured by local people taking ownership. To that end, Mandy is forming a core group of potential future leaders. On Easter day 2005, they managed for the first time to run the service themselves. This expression of church is already financially self-supporting for all its running costs, though they will have to dig deeper if they want to cover this proportion of Mandy’s time.

She sees that having the service once a month does work. It was modest enough to be sustainable and not to threaten other existing expressions. But the longer view is to provide something on a weekly basis particularly for those for whom *Sunday 4.6* is their only church. As they contact those beyond the existing churches that proportion will grow. To grow a weekly expression, we both think small groups are the practical answer; people can apply teaching, grow in Christian community and have a base to reach out

to their own villages. I remain open as whether such groups should be by village or by network.

### Some wider comments

#### Fresh?

**The beauty of the term “a fresh expression of church” is that it is relative.** I neither imagine nor require that *Sunday 4.6* breaks open ground never seen before in corporate worship in the western world. However, in its context, clearly it is fresh and somewhat startling the local Christians. It stretches, but has not snapped, their horizons of what church could be as a community participating in being the disciples of Jesus. Equally important, this is a mission-shaped process, at least in part; it is impelled by the desire of an evangelist to make contact with a surrounding community, 96% of whom do not attend church. For over a decade, I have seen a tension in many fresh expressions. It is between the desire of Christians to worship in a way they are nourished by, and the desire to connect with the outsider. If *Mission-shaped Church* is right to note the centrality of the motif of “dying to live”, in the patterns and teaching of Jesus,<sup>51</sup> then remaining mission-shaped means our preferences in worship are subject to being partners with the God, who journeys at great cost to those who are not yet his people. **Part of the call is to die to our worship preferences** so that with those we are called to reach, all may live.

### The helix that connects process evangelism & holistic small groups

It is clear from examples round the country, and explored in more depth in *Encounters on the Edge* No. 28, that process evangelism courses not only assist the birth of faith, but also create a desirable kind of community and adult style of learning. These need continuing cell groups to foster these values and congregational forms of church are inept at doing so. Thus far that shape looks like a straight line, say drawn from Alpha to cell.<sup>52</sup>

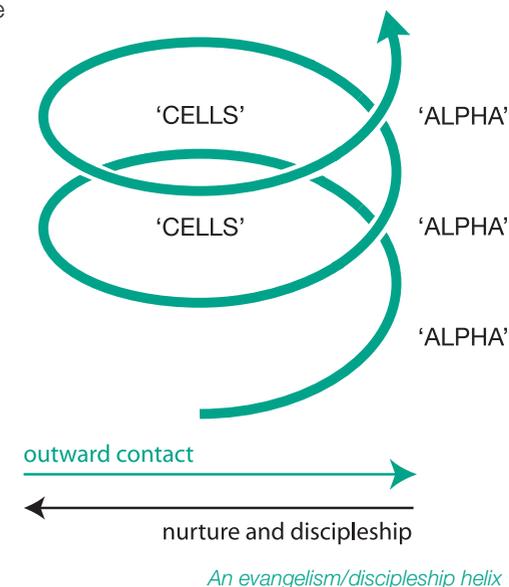
However, now I think that this shape is misleading. Anecdotally, the small groups I have watched, all struggle to deliver their mission mandate, or

<sup>51</sup> *Mission-shaped Church* CHP 2004 p.30 & pp.87-89

<sup>52</sup> This could equally be from *Essence to New Way of Being Church* groups. Process evangelism to small group is generic. I only use Alpha and cell as best known examples.

outward journey. If they are for networks, their contacts are widely spread and not easily gathered. Where the group is of long standing Christians, they have virtually no friends outside church circles. Small groups quickly exhaust the contacts they do have and once those ready to respond have done so, new friends by definition cannot be made quickly. Sowing takes time and as too many western Christians think evangelism is all about harvesting, they fail to discern the necessity of sowing<sup>53</sup>, especially in a post-Christendom mission context. Socials at small groups are fine, but the jump from there to a full cell meeting is intimidating and exposed. **Cell itself does not create floods of converts and was never designed to do so.**<sup>54</sup> Larger churches have found that it is in larger groupings than cell that there is some anonymity, which seems to be the cloak of choice worn in the spiritual exploration of the average Briton.

So the ideal shape is not a straight line because that runs into a buffer stop. Rather, it is a helix. It seems far more possible for a group, or better a set of groups, to be the resource for a further process evangelism course, choosing its hue by the kind of contacts people have. This has many advantages. As mission is the recessive gene in the western Christian, creating episodic opportunities to dare to try out this unfamiliar role is a practical idea. Having groups as the host means a familiar team are serving together, fostering community spirit. There are also ready-made groups to join for those who find faith containing some members of which they already know. The *helix* model of running a course, leading to groups that later lead to another course etc could be a virtuous spiral, not a vicious circle.



<sup>53</sup> Still the most cogent explanation of these stages is Laurence Singlehurst *Sowing Reaping Keeping Crossway* 1995

<sup>54</sup> See *Encounters on the Edge* No.3 pp.27

## Dreams for the future

I can't better Mandy's own thoughts. She sees the need to hand over the running of *Sunday 4.6* to emerging indigenous leaders, as a complementary, not alternative, way of being church in this area. This would free her in her vocation as evangelist to start the process again. Her hope then would be to start yet further back in the creation of something more focussed on the de-churched and the non-churched elsewhere within the deanery.

In her words:

*"My dream is to eventually have different types of worshipping communities, with attendant small groups of disciples all over the area. If ever the traditional churches die, there will then be a continuing Christian presence in the Holsworthy Deanery. It's early days, but so far, God is with us."*

There is no one way of doing fresh expressions. It seems many of them can work in the countryside, which is less different than I imagined.<sup>55</sup> Two caveats stand out. Avoid those that take large resources; they will be unsustainable. Create them within the spirit of the "mixed economy"; start them in parallel to existing expressions, but in living contact with them. This reduces conflict and, more importantly, they will be more **free to be mission-shaped, not church-distorted**. *Encounters on the Edge 28* will tell such a rural cell church story.

George Lings

September 2005

Cartoons: Tim Sharp

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<sup>55</sup> An example of starting a New Way of Being Church group is given in the Feb 2005 edition of Exeter Diocesan News on page 1. A collection of 6 stories is found in the booklet *New Perspectives on Being Church in Somerset* by Stephen Rymmer, available via email [newway@stbr.co.uk](mailto:newway@stbr.co.uk)

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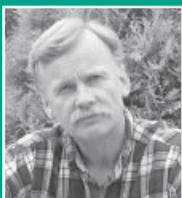
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Supporting the continuing mission  
of the Church of England

# 27: The Village and Fresh Expressions

## - Is rural different?



Some say planting churches only works in urban areas. A variety of stories are emerging to contradict that. Others add that rural is fundamentally different. The reality is more subtle. What variety of people are in countryside and why? Can one expression of church, even the traditional, suit everybody? Rural has always mattered. It is growing in importance as more people move there. It was high time to go and find out more... it led to two issues, this and the next.

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