

# **Theology and Praxis of Rural Officer Ministry**

*How does theology inform the praxis and praxis the theology of Rural Officers?*

## **SUMMARY**

This paper sets out the theology at the heart of the praxis of Rural Officers that enables the work to be fresh, engaged and contextually appropriate. Rural Officers have the opportunity to make significant contributions to mission through: facilitating rural community engagement, understanding and outreach, active involvement in rural networks, partnership working with other rural community organisations, supporting colleagues in ministry, encouraging contextually appropriate mission and evangelism, and contributing to issues of justice in rural areas. The main recommendations deal with the support and resources needed by Rural Officers and the location of the post in the relevant structures for mission within the church.

We hope that this paper will not only assist Rural Officers in theological reflection and enhancing practice but provide those in decision making roles within the church with a greater understanding of the role of Rural Officer.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The role of Rural Officers varies considerably from post to post. Some are part time, others are full time; they can be lay or ordained. Some rural officers have church or other ministerial responsibilities, others are involved in farming or other rural occupations. Rural Officers are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, bringing a variety of gifts and skills to the post, and offer a rich theological and practical resource for churches and rural communities across the country. They often work at a strategic level, having an overview not simply of the particular situation within one or more local church communities, but often over a much broader area. This paper, with its associated documents<sup>1</sup>, is an attempt to articulate something of the theology employed by rural officers and to set out some of the ways in which theology can inform praxis, and praxis theology.

When Rural Officers work with local churches and communities, part of their role is to identify what is already happening there, as well as to explore and initiate new opportunities. They bring not only practical knowledge but also the ability to reflect theologically on the particular experience of the community in which they are working and to suggest ways forward that are consistent with God's will for humankind and all creation.

Theology is a tool which helps us to interpret what we see and plan what we might do next in the light of our Christian faith. Rural Officers work at the points where theology and praxis come together and are a bridge between the two. We trust that this paper and accompanying documents will assist Rural Officers in theological reflection, improving practice and enhancing the work. It will also offer those in decision-making roles of responsibility within the church an insight into the theological and practical value of the role of Rural Officer.

The model of theological practice we commend is a form of the Pastoral cycle with the following five steps:

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<sup>1</sup> Supporting papers available via <http://arankcentre.org/rosresources>

1. a description and reflection of experience
2. situational analysis
3. discover what the Christian tradition (scripture, history, church teaching) has to offer
4. explore what new insights are gained from the above situational analysis in the light of 3.
5. decide what action to take as a result of this theological reflection

We are not offering a systematic theology for Rural Officers, but rather pointers towards good practice and theological thinking. The associated documents explore some selected theological themes in relation to rural issues in greater detail. They raise a wide range of questions and open up conversations which we trust Rural Officers will engage in and continue, from their very varied work contexts.

All the papers are offered in the spirit of theological enquiry which informs praxis, and recognises that praxis and experience inevitably informs theology. Our aim is to encourage and enable Rural Officers to continue with their own theological reflection within a context of both guiding and sustaining their work.

During our discussions the Five Marks of Mission were reaffirmed as fundamental pointers towards our thinking and practice. Wherever we are and whatever our role we seek to:

1. Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. Teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. Respond to human need in loving service
4. Transform unjust structures of society
5. Safeguard creation and sustain and renew the earth.

### **Origins and development of Rural Officer and Agricultural Chaplain posts**

In earlier centuries, rural clergy would be presumed to relate closely to all aspects of rural life. With the professionalization of the clergy, and more recently the trend towards clustering churches under the care of one minister (and the resultant decline in rural clergy numbers), the churches' direct contact with and understanding of rural life has diminished. In the late 1960s recognition began to grow that change in rural society and economy merited attention from the Church. Pioneer posts in rural ministry followed; then in 1990 *Faith in the Countryside*, the report of the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, recommended that each diocese should have someone specializing in rural affairs and that there should be a National Rural Officer based at the Arthur Rank Centre. A surge of interest and appointments followed and most dioceses have retained someone with that responsibility, albeit with a varying amount of time to carry out the role. The Methodist Church also came to appoint Rural Officers with similarly varying degrees of time available. This was followed by the United Reformed Church making Synodical appointments, aware that it had a good number of rural congregations.

While detailed job descriptions vary between dioceses and denominations, the role of a Rural Officer can be summarised as:

To support mission and ministry in rural communities through engagement with rural and agricultural issues, building working relationships with partner organisations

and enabling and equipping the people of the church to contribute from their faith in the context in which they live and work.

Put rather more simply:

Representing rural and agricultural issues to the church to place the Gospel in context, and representing the church and the Gospel to rural people and their issues.

The role of the Rural Officer is clearly about mission with rural and agricultural communities.

Some of the key elements of the role include:

- having an understanding of and expertise in rural and agricultural issues
- reflecting theologically on these issues and the church's role in rural life
- networking with partner organisations engaged in rural life, providing a church presence and voice
- working ecumenically and developing links with other specialists such as (rural) mission enablers, evangelism advisers, ministry officers, training officers, other mission and growth orientated posts
- encouraging and enabling local churches to understand and engage with rural issues, providing information and training where necessary
- identifying, supporting, modelling and promoting good practice in rural mission and ministry including fresh expressions and pioneer ministry
- supporting colleagues in ministry
- enabling or providing agricultural chaplaincy
- addressing meetings and leading worship where appropriate.

The Church of England dioceses currently have 42 Rural Officers<sup>2</sup> all of which are part time appointments by archdeaconry or subject area, usually on the basis of one day a week or less. There are 10 half time appointments. There are around 30 part time Rural Officers working across the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church and two in the Roman Catholic Church.

The group of Rural Officers who have been meeting to develop these theological reflections are a fair representation of the variety of job descriptions and terms of appointment. When asked to describe their work and practice, they used the following terms: *listening; integration; engagement; partnership working; advocacy; speaking; leading worship; pastoral care; chaplaincy; rural proofing; networks; support, encouragement, training; advising and briefing; events; resourcing; interpreting.*

The needs of farming, rural communities and rural churches have become increasingly diverse and pressing – or have been more widely recognised – and so the role of the Rural Officer has expanded in response. It is important, therefore, that priorities and expectations are identified and agreed when the post begins and appropriate reviews of the priorities of the work are undertaken periodically.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses on the work of Rural Officers some but not all of whom carry responsibility for agricultural chaplaincy.

## **THEMES**

Introduced here are some theological themes to begin the exploration of theology which underpins the work of Rural Officers. More detailed information concerning these themes is given in the associated documents for this paper.

The themes identified below have been arranged around the Five Marks of Mission and the five values for a missionary church identified in *Mission-shaped Church*. A missionary church (is):

Focused on God the Trinity – to love, know and worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Incarnational – strips away what has been to reach what is there now.

Transformational – seeks to transform the community.

Makes disciples – has a consistent Christian lifestyle appropriate to the culture.

Relational – has interdependent relationships with other Christians and churches.

The themes do not directly reflect the order of the marks or values, most have aspects of more than one of them, but the list illustrates how Rural Officers can help enable the church to fulfil these aims.

### **Mission**

Mission is an Attribute of God: God creates, speaks, commands, loves, and calls people to be a holy people. In Jesus, God sends the incarnate Son to engage people in a message of redemption and truth. The Christian response to the God of mission is to be part of a missionary church.

That locates the role of the Rural Officer in the context of an outward focus for mission to rural society, but also as an agent for development and potential challenge to the local rural church. It is important that the local rural church reflects on its context, seeks to understand how God is at work in rural society (including the Church), and undertakes rural mission in partnership with the God of mission.

Rural Officers will want to explore the following questions in relation to their work:

- where and how is the God of mission encountered?
- how is the mission of God furthered by that encounter?
- how is the mission of the church furthered by that encounter?
- how is the community changed?

For example, how is the mission of God furthered by a Rural Officer engaging with partner organisations to promote community led planning? Why should the local church work with parish groups to deliver a plan with a community focus? What has this to do with the mission of the church?

### **Incarnation**

The great gift of our Creator is that God became human. “He humbled himself to become human and in becoming human was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a Cross” (Philippians 2:5-8). At the heart of the Christian faith, the incarnation was and remains a

historic event that sends ripples through all ages and alters our perspective and prospects forever.

The incarnation offers to Rural Officers, Agricultural Chaplains and to all engaged in rural ministry, insight into rural scenes as places of encounter with God. The setting for the incarnation was “a town in Galilee called Nazareth” and the first celebration of the news was in a remote rural area, “a town in the hill country of Judah”. It was in the hill country that John the Baptist grew up and learned what God was calling him to do. His was a rural ministry, a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. Rural ministry today helps ensure that the good news of the incarnation and of salvation continues to be talked about in hill and dale, mountain and glen.

A key meaning of the incarnation is that it has elevated humanity to share in the divinity of Christ and provided the Way (Christ) for human beings, gifted with free will, to share and be filled with the Love of God. It is Christ whom we encounter in encountering humanity – and humanity in rural settings, as anywhere else, deserve our best efforts of love and care, compassion and service, whatever the remoteness or particular problems, the starkness or limited means.

Rural Officers together with Agricultural Chaplains offer themselves to the rural context, incarnationally, with their own particularity and uniqueness, carrying the Christ-light wherever initiative draws them, duty calls them or leisure allows. They also offer a contextual awareness and sensitivity to rural cultures, institutions, needs and niceties, wants and woes. *This* is the place, and *these* are the people, it is sometimes enough simply to be *here*. It is good to be *here* with the knowledge of the possibility of the place as it is and as it can be.

### **Community**

In the rural context, community will often be thought of as territorial (geographical), whereas in other contexts, community may be a group of people with common interests, or be network based. A rural community may be both a working community (traditionally farming, but now including rural businesses and home-working) and a recreational community who seek peace, tranquillity, and a rest from the work environment through visits, in retirement or as a base for commuting. The Christian community (church) is spoken of in the New Testament both as *koinonia* – (fellowship, fellow-travellers, a group of friends with a common goal) and as *ecclesia* (the gathered people of God).

Rural Officers encourage the local church to reflect on its own community life and the ways it is embedded in (or separated from) the local community. For example, with regard to relationships: how do we love our neighbours? How do we work with others to break down social barriers, overcome divisions between incomers and the indigenous residents, and manage competing aspirations and expectations? Rural Officers will help local communities to explore their context, the history, traditions and customs that shape them. Is a particular community a place of Exodus or Exile? Is it different things for different elements of the community? What about the decline of trust, the increase of security measures and the emergence of gated communities? How can the church exercise ministry in such contexts? With the decline of services in rural areas, and rapid changes in land-based occupations and in some places the impact of depopulation, where can hope be found? How can the rural church be a community of hope? Rural officers can bring insights to the local church from a wider perspective and share ideas from the experience of other Churches.

## Evangelism

At the heart of evangelism is the hope or desire that a person will give their life to Christ and live out that new life in the fellowship of the Church. A new state is entered into, namely a covenantal relationship between a person and God. "Coming to faith" is today increasingly understood as a journey or process that may take many years and advance through many encounters with the Church and the gospel. "Process evangelism" is often seen as more appropriate than "crisis evangelism", especially in rural areas where there remains a latent Christendom. However, whilst an intuitive faith embraced through a process of osmosis over many years may be a common rural experience, the notion of adult conversion, i.e. a "crisis decision" to become a Christian, requires careful consideration, particularly as people, both rural and urban, have a decreasing experience of Church and the Christian faith. In addition, misunderstanding can occur between "conversion Christians" and "cradle Christians."

One way of reflecting on the journey to faith is to think of the following Five Bs: Befriending, Belonging, Believing, Behaving and Blessing. How do the first two of these work out in the rural context?

- **Befriending** – there is often a natural assumption that rural villages and areas are friendly. What needs to be teased out is the difference between friendliness and friendships. There is also a need for caution regarding "targeted" friendships, that is, making friends only as a means to try and bring about conversion, which can be very damaging in a settled rural community. Rural churches can develop a culture of invitation, inviting others to "come and join us" at various events in the church or church hall. People can be invited into "our area", even if it is only a temporary tabernacle, such as the church tent at the village fete or country show. Both of these must involve genuine encounter. However, it is important that we also cross their threshold and move into their comfort zone, that is, cross the physical threshold into homes, clubs, pubs, farms, shops, etc. A second, deeper move is crossing the threshold of people's lives, discovering their dreams, their hopes and aspirations, which might make it necessary for us also to allow them into our private space as we begin to develop a relationship. It is here that we can begin to witness to God's love, care and grace.
- **Belonging** – There still may be some truth in the saying, "in urban areas people belong to the Church whereas in rural areas the Church belongs to the people." That is why some find the idea of the "Back to Church" initiative difficult to embrace, because how can you call people back to somewhere they have never left? Even if they do not regularly attend, some rural people still have a strong affiliation and feel that they belong.

## Place

The significance of rural church buildings as places of encounter with God has been largely overlooked in recent Christian theology, which has tended instead to speak of church buildings only in terms of their instrumental or utilitarian value. There are numerous biblical examples of encounters with God in particular places (e.g. Jacob at Bethel, Genesis 28:10-22), with an overarching theme of the Old Testament being Israel's relationship with the Promised Land. In the New Testament, significance is attributed to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ in a particular place and at a particular time (e.g. Luke 2:1-7). In

England the idea of a spiritually significant place declined greatly after the Reformation and Enlightenment, which sought to shift the focus away from a divine experience of place to a more academic and scientific approach. Both developments contributed to the current utilitarian view of church buildings. However, theologians now argue for a recovery of the sacramental nature of church buildings and their place as mediators of the connection between the world, God and humanity.

The focus of applied theology has often been either on social action (church as advocate and mediator in the community) or on church order, for example, lay ministry and clergy deployment. However, the importance of the church *building* and the land around it may also have significance within the local community and with visitors to the area. Rural Officers need to take into account the significance of *place* when working with congregations on potential changes to the building and exploring options for outreach, including mission to visitors. A popularist theology which draws non-churchgoers to churches should not be seen as a bar to either social action or evangelism, but as an integral part of the theological reflection rural churches need to undertake, and which Rural Officers can encourage and enable. The importance of rural church buildings to our nation's spirituality should not be underestimated as seen, for example, in the number of church spires which are a feature of many communities.

## **Justice**

The fourth of the Five Marks of Mission is “to seek to transform unjust structures of society”, a desire rooted in a biblical vision of God, whose mission in the world includes establishing and upholding justice, and whose servants are commended for their wisdom in executing justice. God's love of justice and the prophetic demand for justice are seen in both the Old and New Testaments (for example, Psalm 33:5; Isaiah 1:16-17; Micah 6:8; Matthew 12:18; Matthew 25:34-36). God's desire for justice is consistent with divine compassion for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. God requires, and the prophets call for, fair treatment, honest dealing, and practical care especially for the dispossessed. In the Gospels, Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God and sets out the manifesto of that coming Kingdom in imagery drawn from the Old Testament prophets (Luke 4:16-19), declaring that the vision is becoming a present reality in his own person and ministry. God's justice is expressed in generous and abundant blessing: water turned into wine (John 2:1-11); a hungry crowd fed (John 6: 1-13); table fellowship shared with sinners and outcasts (Luke 15:2). In exploring justice issues in a rural context, this biblical background will encourage us to relate justice to compassion, love, goodness, kindness, generosity, liberation, inclusion, health and wholeness, and abundant life-giving practices (cf. Galatians 5:22-26, ‘the fruits of the Spirit’).

Rural Officers, working in rural communities and with rural churches, will daily encounter issues around justice in a number of areas; for example, in relation to food and food production; the many issues surrounding affordable housing; the decline of rural services; fuel poverty; rural deprivation and disadvantage; economic development and resulting conflicts over land use and social impacts. Rural Officers seek to hold together both pastoral care and prophetic challenge, and need to be able to think theologically and practically about when it might be necessary to take a public stance on an issue rather than simply “being alongside”. Individuals may sometimes stand back from being involved, in order to see the bigger picture, but when do we move from “seeing” to “acting”, and what might be the cost?

## **Reconciliation**

The theme of reconciliation is deeply rooted in scripture. Arguably the first example is in Genesis with the covenant between God and creation (Genesis 8:20 f). The sacrificial code in Leviticus is founded amongst other things on the concept of reconciling humanity with God. As the early Church began to think about the significance of the death of Christ, the theme of reconciliation was again raised. The idea of Christ's ministry being one of reconciliation runs through the letters of Paul, where he speaks of Christ reconciling the world to God (Eph 2:16, Col 1: 20). Two ideas are important for Paul. Firstly, the reconciliation is between God and the world. Secondly, God is actively involved in the reconciliation, "through Christ" and "in Christ". As followers of Christ, we too are instructed to be reconcilers.

There are many contexts today in which the church is called to the work of reconciliation, both between and among peoples, between people and the rest of creation, and between people and God. A proper appreciation of the natural world and our place within it can help to (re)connect us to the "in the beginning God" who stands at the heart of creation, reminding us of our proper dependence on God for all that we have and are.

There is also a need for reconciliation between urban and rural communities. For both communities, there can be a profound lack of understanding about the challenges that the other faces, and stereotypes abound. Stereotypes thrive on lack of information, so for the Rural Officer reconciliation starts with giving information. Since the church has branches everywhere, Rural Officers have an important role to play in helping urban and rural churches learn from each other, but in particular by explaining the rural context to the urban church.

## **Creation**

We are, as human beings, part of the natural world. People of faith have marvelled for millennia at the way that creation sustains our lives. Some people see God *as* creation, but Christians look at the natural order and see within it a witness to its Creator.

Rural Officers are called, together with all Christians, to reflect theologically on the way that creation impinges on the lives of people and the way that human activity impacts on the environment. Rural life gives many opportunities to experience creation directly; for example, it is often easier to be more aware of the rhythms of the day (light and darkness) and the patterns of the seasons in rural rather than urban contexts; and there may also be a greater connectedness with the land and livestock through living with and alongside farming communities. There is a role for Rural Officers in resourcing the local church to see and celebrate the changing seasons and changing landscape, through annual services which celebrate the farming year, for example Rogation, Lammas, and Harvest. Rural Officers are also on hand to inform and advise when our sometimes difficult and painful relationship with Creation is revealed. This was shown during the Foot and Mouth crisis of 2001, while currently there are the issues around Bovine TB and badger culls, as well as the need to reflect on global issues such as climate change. Rural Officers can assist local churches and rural practitioners to develop a robust theological and practical framework within which to speak and act in response to such crises and situations.



## How do these theological themes bear fruit in the praxis of rural officers?

1. **Being there:** Incarnation - the importance of simply being there, at the livestock market, the county show, the rural community council, wherever members of the rural community are to be found; in addition being part of decision-making processes of organisations and church structures at a strategic level.
2. **Seeing:** The complexity of many rural issues requires Rural Officers to keep themselves informed and up-to-date by reading and reflection as well as by listening and observing. The aim is to understand and to interpret, and to engage in contextual theology and to share insights gained with local churches and church leaders.
3. **Resourcing:** Rural Officers draw on their knowledge and understanding, and through seeing the “bigger picture”, to inform, guide and resource the rural church. Resources include both theological and practical ideas.
4. **Advising:** Rural Officers play their part in informing and advising diocesan and other denominational leaders and the national church, in relation to rural issues and rural church policies and practices. Rural Officers can also contribute to the development of national rural policies, either directly through membership of committees and action groups, or indirectly by briefing and advising senior church leaders and national officers who may have more direct contact with policy makers.
5. **Educating:** Rural Officers help to educate the urban and suburban church about rural church, rural life, and the relationships between rural and urban communities and contexts. “Food” is a particularly useful lens through which to explore the urban-rural relationship, since most food is produced in the countryside and everyone eats.
6. **Advocating:** The “prophetic challenge” will sometimes lead Rural Officers to be engaged in advocacy and practical support, e.g. of farmers in crisis or vulnerable migrant workers, or in relation to affordable housing or the development of community projects.
7. **Proclaiming the gospel:** Rural Officers encourage appropriate rural evangelism. Whether or not they are themselves gifted as evangelists, as partners/participants in strategic and voluntary non-church bodies, they contribute a “faith perspective” (sharing Gospel/Kingdom values) in discussions and planning for rural communities.
8. **Being:** The Rural Officer’s personal lifestyle and daily decisions on matters relating to, for example, food production and consumption should be rooted in theological understanding of creation, community, justice and reconciliation. The Rural Officer will also need to sustain a healthy personal spirituality and physical well-being in order to survive this demanding ministry.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognising that the role of Rural Officer is missional in nature, the following recommendations have emerged out of our discussions<sup>3</sup>.

- Rural Officers need to be properly resourced in both time and funding in order to do an effective job.
- Rural Officers should have effective line management with clear lines of responsibility and accountability, agreed objectives with defined outputs and outcomes and an annual appraisal.

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<sup>3</sup> See also *The Roles, Responsibilities and Resources of Rural Officers* by Revd Jonathan Still (2007) <http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/mission-and-ministry/rural-officers-network/rural-officers-resources>

- Recognising that a Rural Officer is a part time role, careful thought needs to be given as to how the role is shared with other responsibilities.
- Rural Officers should have the ability, understanding and time to be incarnational so as to allow the church to engage authentically within the rural world.
- Rural Officers need to be trained in theological reflection as well as being given time to undertake it and to enable others to reflect theologically.
- Rural Officers should work ecumenically wherever possible to share ideas and resources to build capacity to deliver more effectively.
- Rural Officers must have a clear and acknowledged place within existing and emerging church structures, including strategic teams, practitioner groups and mission initiatives.
- Rural Officers should be part of and contribute to the national network of Rural Officers / Agricultural Chaplains and work with the National Rural Officers.
- Rural Officers should understand that rural communities are changing and contested spaces and be able to equip and enable others to understand this in order to promote community life in rural settings.
- Further work needs to be done to explore how the Rural Officer role relates to current and emerging models of church.

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Gordon Banks – Evangelist Chichester Diocese

Mark Betson – Rural Officer Chichester Diocese

Elizabeth Clark – Rural Officer York and Hull and Leeds Methodist Districts

Glyn Evans – Rural Officer Oxford Diocese

Jill Hopkinson – National Rural Officer

Keith Ineson – Cheshire Agricultural Chaplain

Thomas McEvoy – Edinburgh, Roman Catholic

Julie Nelson – Rural Officer Chelmsford Diocese

Caroline Pinchbeck – Rural Officer Canterbury Diocese

Philip Wagstaff – Rural Officer Plymouth and Exeter Methodist District