

5+ Rural Learning Network for multi-parish benefice clergy



'It's good to talk – but you don't really understand my situation.' From my conversations with many in 'front line' parochial ministry, this is a not-uncommon yet largely unspoken feeling.



True, every situation, every ministerial context is different, unique perhaps. But some are *more* different. In these situations it can seem harder to find others who truly understand, let alone empathise with not just the struggles and disappointments but with what really are the achievements and encouragements in that setting. Plenty will listen, many will sympathise, some will try to understand but far fewer will succeed. To be fair, before you can understand you may have had to 'be there'; live it, breathe it, have felt the pulse of a place and its people. But that's not likely to happen, is it? Or is it?

In fact, a number of ministers involved in leading one strand of diocesan ministry are benefitting from a regular gathering known as the Rural Learning Network. You might call it an antidote to isolationism as it presents an opportunity for those immersed in rural ministry to meet with those working in similar contexts and facing similar issues and pressures.

It's not a new idea, but unlike those excruciating 'gripe groups' we may have endured, this gathering offers time to explore current problems and is shaped to enable its members to reflect on ways forward.

As convenor and facilitator, Steve Annandale (from the School of Formation) admits that he sees members leaving a session with as many questions – possibly more – than when they arrived, but that is not the point. The genius of the group is that others *recognise* the questions. Some have been able to re-frame them so they have become manageable – even solvable. This is a group that does not set out to deliver solutions but it does offer clarification and insight only feasible through shared experience.

The phrase 'I know where you are coming from' has never been so apt. What is shared has the authentic ring of credibility – a refreshing change from some generalised 'worthy words' that have little hope of being transformed into anything that can be applied back at the 'pew-face' in deepest rural Somerset.

One beneficiary and 'fan' of the Rural Learning Network is Andrew Chalkley, Rector of Beckington with Standerwick, Berkley, Rodden, Lullington with Orchardleigh. Andrew says, 'Rural ministry demands that church leaders both prop up Christendom and act as apostolic missionaries, and so anything that helps towards a 'big picture' strategy is most welcome.'



Ken Brown is priest in charge of a rural parish on the Mendip Hills and the Levels. It consists of seven villages, six ancient churches, four hamlets, lots of isolated farms and a total population of about 1,800. When he heard about the group he thought it might be useful to join. "It is a decision I have not regretted," he says. For Ken the most useful part is that the group asks lots of questions designed to open up a particular issue. As he explains, "No response is required to these questions, but we make notes

and then take away any that seem to be helpful for further consideration, reporting back at the next session. This very open format invites honesty in sharing issues and in responding to them.'

Ken says the other great benefit is that the group members are all in much the same boat (or, at least, in similar boats) which helps counter the feeling of isolation which can occur in such a specific type of ministry. With such positive testimony to a relatively simple idea (they so often seem the best ones) maybe some similar initiatives can be triggered? Not all of our isolated are in rural ministry but those who are should contact Steve, while others may like to approach the School of Formation to explore the possibility of similar networks.

It seems it really is good to talk – especially with those who understand.

Brian Pearson

Steve Annandale, the facilitator for the 5+ Rural Learning Network, has provided some very helpful notes on how the sessions work, and how a similar network might be run elsewhere. Go to germinate.net and search '[5+ Rural Learning Network supporting information](#)' to download these notes.

For more information on the Rural Learning Network or to discuss other potential networks, please contact Dawn Hickman, School of Formation, Diocese of Bath & Wells - on 01749 685106 or ordawn.hickman@bathwells.anglican.org

This article originally appeared on the Diocese of Bath & Wells website.