

The changing face of church-planting



On the first Sunday of each month high quality, fresh coffee, tea, croissants and bacon butties are all on the breakfast menu at Haddenham Village Hall in Buckinghamshire.

This is Caféplus – the church in community mode. Other things happen during the morning depending on the resources available and using the various rooms of the village hall venue. There is a crèche in a space adjacent to the café and a children’s Sunday School running in another room for part of the morning. In a third room, there is a Quiet Space and the opportunity for prayer ministry. Each month there will be different one-off events of general interest to the community.

A litter-picking party round the village, a demonstration by hand bell ringers, a craft sale for a developing world charity. A presentation called Food 4 Thought takes place at 10.30am, presenting contemporary issues from a Christian perspective with an emphasis on accessibility and informality. Caféplus is still developing. An enquirers course is an optional activity in part of the venue, Bible study and worship may grow from this. Currently an outreach project of St Mary’s church in Haddenham, it may eventually develop into a church plant.

In the Tas Valley in Norfolk, church-planting takes a completely different form. Here Christians meet in small groups known as cells for prayer, bible study, worship and to engage in practical service and mission together. The church has grown to 50 adult members and 20 young people in five years. A majority of these people are new to faith.

Hollybush Christian Fellowship is situated in the farmyard of Jim Wilkinson in the remote hamlet of Newsham in Yorkshire. It is a larger congregation with a more conventional programme of worship services. However, it deliberately seeks to meet people who are not part of a church congregation in their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. The fellowship receives referrals from social services and local doctors’ surgeries, some for practical help and some for pastoral care. There is a used clothing store open 2-3 days a week and a café. There is a programme for children including holiday projects and seasonal workshops. Volunteers from Hollybush are also active in visiting a local prison, hospital visiting and in the church army youth bus project in nearby Thirsk.

Doing what God sends us to do

These are just a small selection from the many exciting examples of rural churchplanting in Britain today. Yet, a few years ago, when the working party for the bestselling *Mission-shaped church* report asked questions about church-planting in a questionnaire, there was a less than enthusiastic response from rural areas. As one Church of England official wrote, ‘With 648 churches in this diocese, there is little incentive to plant more.’ This is understandable; in the countryside there are typically many more churches per head of population than in urban areas – and some of those congregations struggle to keep going. A person might well conclude we don’t need any more.

However, deep down, we know that when we think like that we’ve got it precisely the wrong way round. God’s mission isn’t there to keep existing particular congregations going. Rather it is the church as God’s people, which has been called into being to participate in God’s mission: the sharing of his love with his world. The whole point of church is God’s mission: doing what God sends us to do. The need for church-planting is often something that emerges when people consider what church in a particular area of countryside would look like if we started from that perspective. If God has sent his people to this rural area what is it that they need to do to carry out his mission, including the making of disciples?

Reasons for rural church-planting

Church-planting is needed where the existing forms of church are not able for one reason or another to make new disciples among a significant number of people in that area. Sometimes this is because of new housing which would be better served by its own church than by that serving a neighbouring community.

More frequently, the existing churches may have a culture well-suited to the needs of those who attend now but may find it impossible to adapt to the needs of other sections of the local community without hurting those who find the church speaks to them as it is. Fast social change may mean that the traditional model of Sunday worship in a building of historical significance does not feel like good news to a significant number of unchurched rural dwellers.

For example, new employment patterns, increased mobility and family breakdown have contributed to a complete change in the nature of Sunday. It is now a day for working, visiting family who live some distance away or shopping. A midweek church plant such as a cell church or after school congregation may be able to respond more easily to the needs which some people have.

Except in areas of new housing, these cultural factors mean that rural church-planting often does not start with a building and a Sunday service. Frequently, the starting point is service of a different sort – the practical love of Christ. This is shown in food and laughter, care and action; fulfilling the contemporary hunger for community in a countryside where the old community structures have been deeply weakened with the decline in numbers involved in agriculture and local work.

Together for God's Kingdom

One particular characteristic of good rural church planting is the degree to which it complements older forms of church. This is partly aiming for the Heineken effect: reaching the parts that other churches have not reached!

It is also about appreciating the strengths of other churches and loving them. A church plant which is great at communicating the gospel to teenagers through contemporary youth culture, might struggle to make Jesus real for elderly people and vice versa. When those two churches meet for joint projects or to socialise together, they give a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Urban church plants with larger numbers and working in larger populations may get away with independent witness. In a rural village, everyone can see whether the Christians truly love and support one another. As Jesus said, 'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Revd Sally Gaze is the author of *Mission-shaped and rural* – Growing churches in the countryside, Church House Publishing at £7.99. She is also the convenor of the Rural Churchplanters' Forum. To find out more about the Rural Churchplanters' Forum including how to join, please contact ask@sheffieldcentre.org.uk.

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