

Steps



Exploring the Context

Like much in rural ministry Steps is hard to define - it isn't a home group and it isn't a discussion group. In a sense Steps is Steps, Christians supporting each other in The Way. It can be hard for people in larger congregations to understand the pattern of rural faith. In these small North Oxfordshire villages Sunday attendance at any of the six weekly services can range from 4 to 40 - and that can be the same church with the same service in a different month. Such variations are common in small congregations, but North Oxfordshire is a particular context where small communities are combined with diverse, busy more urban lifestyles – truly 'rural cosmopolitan.'



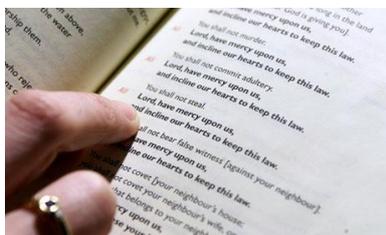
Pastoral care from the parish priest can be a challenge. On a Sunday morning visits are fleeting as the clergy dash from village to village. As some people always worship in their village, some travel to a preferred form of worship and some vary their worship as they wish it is not unusual for a minister not to see 'regulars' for months. At the same time many in the churches are recognising the strength of coming together as benefice, supporting one another in prayer, worship, mission and finance.

In the past small groups, even seasonal study groups, have struggled. Typically people managed three or four sessions out of a six week course.

Steps grew out of that context. A group of people lay and ordained, who meet together once a month as they are able and commit to a simple rhythm or rule of life. The structure of the gatherings is less important than the atmosphere, but refreshments are always enjoyed, and compline is always said at 9pm in the nearest parish church. A core group of people come every month; others drop in as they are able. The commitment to the community is not so much about meetings as the rhythm or rule we explore together:

Pattern

Committing to a pattern of prayer that fits and shapes our living. Following the seasons of the church and of life. Meeting together when we are able.



The pattern of prayer we share is a simple one. The services of morning and evening prayer provided in the Prayer Book are intended for all, not just those in ministry, yet morning and evening are difficult times for many. So Steps offers a simple shape of prayer based on the mid-day office and compline, although we are free to follow whichever pattern we find both fits and shapes our lives. This pattern is seen in a wider context too as we celebrate the saints and seasons. When we do meet

this pattern shapes out meeting. We do not meet to discuss parish share or hot-topic theology, but to be open and honest about our spirituality, something Anglicans frequently need to feel permission to do. We have shared our experiences of Christ's presence in Holy Communion, explored how God speaks to each of us in different ways and considered the nature of vocation as one of our community left us for the religious life.

Presence

Learning together what it means to be visible Christians in our communities and our social networks.

"We never see the Vicar", true or false is a frustration in many smaller villages. Increasingly Church Wardens fulfil more of this role, but Steps recognises this as a shared responsibility. A growing confidence is found in being open about our faith. One member of our community organises a 'faith and art' group in their village as well as a monthly farmers market, but for other members it is a simple step of being honest to neighbours and friends that they are Christians or a 'Church Person'. Sometimes clergy need to learn to be visible, even if it is strategic attendance at events!

Pilgrimage

Growing in faith with one another and journeying together, both physically and spiritually.



Some Steps members have been Christians a long time, others are newer or returners to faith. Recently reflecting on Hebrews 5 barriers have crumbled as we realised that our weaknesses enabled us in our shared priestly ministry, that wherever we think we are there is something we can offer. There was even some discomfort as the implications sunk in regarding ordained ministry.

Our pilgrimage together is about spiritual pilgrimage but physical journeys can be part of this. Many of us have found themselves traveling, not just to monthly gatherings, but on a Sunday morning, be it for an 8.30 Prayer Book Holy Communion, or to play the organ at different services. We don't just tolerate this as a frustrating aspect of contemporary rural church, but engage with it as spiritual service. We have shared our responses to different places of worship, highs and lows.

Taking Steps Together

The three-fold rule we adopted was not an accident, it was a response to the particular challenges of being a rural Christian in North Oxfordshire, others considering a similar community would need to reflect on their context and a suitable rule, although I suspect there is considerable overlap.

As a parish priest Steps is not only a place of giving but of receiving. Although my role as minister of word and sacrament is recognised, the responsibility for prayer and planning is shared, especially with our Lay Warden. We practice hospitality and welcome the occasional as well as the regular, especially those involved in lay ministry who recognise that Steps meetings are a place to come for support and encouragement. We hold each other and the benefice in prayer even when we are not together.

Edward has commented subsequently: 'A number of people are seeking to explore new monasticism (sometimes NM) in a rural context. from new ecumenical intentional communities through to groups drawing inspiration from new monasticism to renew existing forms of church through mutual discipleship and mission. Steps is one example of how that might start. The Fresh Expressions Rural Round Table (see part of the content here) intends to help by linking practitioners in similar contexts. If you are involved or interested, contact me at eddiebgreen@gmail.com.'

You can also find more information in '[Catching the Wave](#)' - a recent article in Country Way on new monasticism & the sacramental tradition in rural situations.

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