

READY, STEADY, GROW

A 5-week course for rural churches

Leaders' Notes



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READY, STEADY, GROW: Introduction

The inspiration for the course has come from two resources. The first, **Presence: a workbook to help promote & sustain an effective Christian presence in villages (Presence)**, was produced in 2004 by the Methodist Church. Its purpose is exactly what it says! The second, **Seeds in Holy Ground: a workbook for rural churches (Seeds)**, was published in 2005 by the Rural Affairs Committee of the General Synod of the Church of England.

While both are for rural churches they have a different approach. **Presence** looks at the wider issues of being a church in today's countryside. **Seeds** is more practical and addresses some of the issues facing rural churches. I commend both to you and hope that this course will encourage you to look at both and decide how using them in more detail could help your church wherever it may be. Leaders of the course should have a copy of both although those attending do not necessarily need one. (Copies of both can be downloaded from the *Arthur Rank Centre* website: **Presence** [here](#), and **Seeds** [here](#).)

Ecumenical

While its inspiration comes from workbooks for rural churches in specific denominations, this course is intended for any church. Every church is unique, as is the community in which it finds itself. The course will encourage each church to look at its context, the place and the people where it is and consider how effective it is being at witnessing to God's love here and now.

The course lasts for five weeks and was originally intended for use during Lent; but it can be used at any time of year. It is intended to be followed by small groups with a Leader who does not need to have previous experience of leading such a group. Participants can be from one congregation or from a local group of churches; from all one denomination or from a mixture of denominations.

Structure

Each session follows a similar pattern. The basic outline should last 90 minutes. There are additional activities for those who wish to have a longer session. These could also be offered for people to do alone or collectively during the intervening week.

It starts with an informal time, possible with drinks served. From general chatting and introductions the leader introduces a single question or reflection which allows people to start thinking about the topic for the evening. The more formal part begins with a practical gathering of information about the topic, either focussed on the community or the church.

Central to each session is a Bible Study for which full notes are provided though the questions are planned to encourage discussion relevant to the particular communities and churches represented.

The evening ends with more questions drawing together the first two parts and leading the group forward. Where they are going will depend on where they start from and so week one determines the starting point. The next three weeks look at various aspects of being a church and the final week looks back at the journey and plans the next stages. By then the destination may be becoming clearer.

Material

For each session the material provides the leader with

- An outline of the evening with the questions to be considered
- Suggestions for how to collate the information gathered at the start of the evening
- Background material for the Bible Study
- Where to find more information including which parts of **Presence** or **Seeds** are being referred to. Leaders should read these before each session
- Suggestions for additional activities that some may wish to undertake between sessions
- Prayers for use at various points if the leaders wish to use them
- Ideas for how to use the material with groups from more than one church and in different settings

Session 1: Getting Ready

Leaders Notes

Suggested timings

15 minutes	Introduction and initial question
20 minutes	Focussing on us
30 minutes	Bible Study
20 minutes	Moving forward
5 minutes	Closing worship

Preparation

Ensure you are familiar with the material for the session. Read **Presence pp5-13** and **Seeds pp4-7**. Collect any other relevant resources you may have. This week you will need local maps, large sheets of paper or other material to make your map.

Focussing

The aim is to produce a sketch map of your community. It needs to be big enough for everyone to see clearly. You may wish to prepare the outline in advance using a large photocopy of a local map or sketching out the main roads on flip chart paper. Large felt tip markers are useful. For a village the area to be covered will be clear. In larger places the first task will be to define the area, perhaps using civil or diocesan parish boundaries or other landmarks chosen by the group. Encourage people to mark on it places of importance in their lives eg houses, shops, schools, homes of people they are concerned about. When the map is complete, undertake a virtual prayer walk. Either have a time of silence during which people can imagine walking around the village pausing at different places to pray or lead the prayer walk by agreeing where to start and encouraging people to move, in their minds, from one point of interest to the next. Close with a prayer offering all the places and the people you have visited to God's love.

Bring the home-made map to *each session* to remind the group of the community they serve.

Biblical background

This book is sometimes seen as a bit of a mystery. The author is unknown and the original recipients were not a church in a particular place. Instead it was addressed to Jewish converts to Christianity. Even the date is not definitely known but it was probably written before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It is thought that many of those who received it originally had been priests before their conversion. Even if they weren't they would have been very familiar with the Jewish scriptures and with their own religious history and traditions. The letter draws heavily on those to support its theme of the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus as the revealer and mediator of God's grace.

The passage we are looking at looks back to the heroes of their traditions as examples for the future. You may wish to explore what we mean by heroes today. In a culture where celebrities are sometimes famous just for being famous, where do we find examples of people who have lived well and contributed positively to society.

Some of the names mentioned in the passage will be well known to you, others are more obscure. Ideally encourage the group to look up some of the less well known names to see what they can find out about them. The list is on the next sheet.

Abel	Genesis 4	His sacrifice was seen as being more acceptable than Cain's, possibly not so much in what was offered but in his attitude to worship
Enoch	Genesis 5: 18-24	Only a very short mention of him in the genealogy of Noah. He was Methusaleh's father. There is no mention of his death leading to the tradition that he didn't die but was taken up by God
Noah	Genesis 6-9	Built the ark as God asked and known as a righteous man though an occasion of drunkenness is recorded
Sarah	Genesis 18	One of the very few women in the list. Laughed at God when he promised her a baby but it did happen
Abraham	Genesis 22	Obedied God even when asked to sacrifice his only son
Isaac	Genesis 27	Blessed his sons even though one tried to trick him
Jacob	Genesis 49	A complicated life story but at the end blessed his sons too
Joseph	Genesis 50	Sold into slavery by his brothers but forgave them and kept faith with Israel and God even when in Egypt
Moses	Exodus 2	Led the Israelites out of the promised land but early in his life had to run away after he killed an Egyptian
Rehab	Joshua 2	A prostitute who hid the spies of Joshua at the siege of Jericho and so her house and family were spared
Barak	Judges 4	Lead Israel to victory in the time of Deborah
Gideon	Judges 6-8	Led a successful campaign against the Mideonites. Many stories around him include the signs that foretold his victory. He needed reassurance but then he led a smaller force to victory over a larger one
Jephthah	Judges 10, 11	Started out as a bandit chief after he was expelled by his family yet he too was chosen by God to lead Israel, this time against the Ammonites
Samson	Judges 14	Chosen by God to lead Israel despite a violent history
David	1 Samuel 16	Renowned as a great King but his personal life would not be seen as a good example today
Samuel	1 & 2 Samuel	Given to God as a child and grew to be the first prophet for a long time. He anointed David as the first King of Israel

This is an interesting group, all different in many ways but also similar in that they were all very definitely human with weaknesses all too apparent at times. There is a thread of God using unlikely people and not giving up on them when they find His path hard. Heroes of the faith can be ordinary people who sometimes get in wrong and definitely aren't perfect. This should encourage the group to see that they too could be a hero to someone else.

Moving forward

Look at the history of your own denomination or tradition and identify any people who could be said to be the heroes. Do the same for your own church identifying particular benefactors of people important in founding or maintaining the church where it is.

Encourage people to look back on their individual faith journey to this point and identify any people who played an important part. They might have encouraged them at a difficult time, inspired them with a Sunday School lesson, sermon or through personal example or they might have challenged them to take an important step in their journey of faith.

Sources

www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html for up-to-date census data on your community.

Presence pp5-13; Seeds pp4-7.

Detailed local maps.

For groups with more than one church

Where the churches represented are in different communities you can stay in one group for the initial question but may wish to break into single community groups for the information gathering and map making. Moving forward should be done as one group as it gives the opportunity to share the stories of the different churches.

Session 2: The Priestly Church

Leaders Notes

Suggested timings

10 minutes	Introduction and initial question
20 minutes	Focussing on us
30 minutes	Bible Study
20 minutes	Moving forward
10 minutes	Closing worship

Preparation needed

Think how to collect & display the ways your church exercises its priestly ministry. You might:

- Give everyone a piece of paper with the 5 ways to recognise a priestly ministry written on it. Ask them to add the activities of your church that they feel fit into one of the categories.
- Write the 5 ways on a large sheet of paper. Invite people to write activities on that sheet.
- Write the 5 ways on a large sheet of paper. Give everyone post-it notes and pens. Collect the notes and decide together where to place them.
- Have available symbols of the different activities that might be named, e.g. candle, bread, home communion set, hymn sheet from a special service. Give people blank cards to name activities and place them in a 3-dimensional display

These are only a few ideas. I am sure you will find many more ways. In the next 2 weeks you will be producing similar collections for the prophetic and evangelistic ministries of your church. In week 5 you are encouraged to think how these may be shared with the rest of the church and any other groups following this course. You may wish to talk to other group leaders to plan this in advance, especially if space is at a premium.

Biblical background

Acts is the second book written by Luke. While his gospel ends with the ascension, this starts there. It is the story of the early church. The passage we are looking at follows immediately on from the story of Pentecost. We are concentrating on the worship life of the early church and the connections between this and their daily life.

The new converts were Jews, used to gathering daily in the Temple courts where worship would have been happening all the time. They continue to meet there together but also meet in homes. Suddenly there are 3000 converts. Some may have known something of the story of Jesus already but others may have known nothing. There were no written texts at that time only the stories of the disciples who would have been kept busy repeating them to different groups.

The worship is noted as joyful (verse 46) and included praise. They are breaking bread together. This may mean both sharing meals and also beginning to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is in these times that rituals might have started to be developed. Prayer is central to all that is happening. Worship seemed to be part of everyday life. It wasn't only for one day a week or for a short time. Wonders and miracles are reported though no details are given.

Sources

Presence pp8-13 & 15 - thoughts about the rural church today.

Seeds pp6-7 - continue the theme of the church today. To inform the discussions in *Moving Forward* you may wish to introduce ideas from other sections e.g. **pp6-18** on special services such as baptisms, **pp26-29** on worship ideas and **pp44-46** on worship at different times.

For groups representing more than one church

Focussing on us. Decide if you are going to make one display for all the churches or let each church do this individually. Encourage a sharing of the different ways the different churches undertake this priestly ministry.

Session 3: The Prophetic Church

Leaders Notes

Suggested timings

10 minutes	Introduction and initial question
20 minutes	Focussing on us
30 minutes	Bible Study
20 minutes	Moving forward
10 minutes	Closing worship

Preparation needed

Introduction

The word prophet is derived from the Greek word *prophetes* which means one who speaks before others. It is usually used for those who communicate divine revelation. Before the exile into Babylon there were a lot of prophets around and not all of them were truly passing on divine revelation. It is widely accepted that most of the written texts were produced during the exile. On the return to Jerusalem the written word of the law gradually became the accepted word of God and its reading started to reduce the need for prophecy.

Although foretell is often used to describe a prophetic utterance it is a misconception to think of it as prediction. Often it is a commentary on what is happening at the time. Sometimes it includes suggestions as to what might follow if this behaviour or state of affairs is allowed to continue. This leads to a role for modern prophets who speak God's word in today's world, drawing attention to the aspects of life that are not according to God's will for his people.

Focussing

If there are new people present you may need to quickly recap on the week before when you looked at the priestly ministry of your church. Display your ideas in the form you decided last week.

Biblical background

The book of Isaiah is generally accepted as a collection of prophecies and not the work of one prophet. They cover a large time span, both before and shortly after the exile in Babylon. The passage we are looking at is near the end and is from the period after the return from exile. This lasted about 50 years. Those who stayed in the ruined and conquered Jerusalem tried to carry on as before but all the leaders had been taken away so it was a struggle. In contrast those who had been taken away included most of the priests and leaders. Some of them spent the time away in collecting the oral traditions and writing them down in the books of the law. Like many people forced to live away from their homeland they carried with them, and passed onto their children a rather idealised picture of Jerusalem and the worship of the Temple. All this meant that when they were finally allowed to return and rebuild the city there were two very different groups of people each thinking their version of how to live by God's laws was the right one. One group stressed adherence to the letter of the Law, as written in exile. Others were more insistent on the spirit of God's law. This passage in Isaiah 65 comes from the second group and talks of how to live in the new Jerusalem, the kingdom of God.

This new kingdom will be a place where

- Children live
- Old people live in dignity
- People build houses for themselves not others
- People produce food for themselves and not others

Try and concentrate on the local context although you may feel that some issues such as infant mortality are a greater problem in other parts of the world. The discussion might encompass the desire to see children live fulfilling lives, not mere survival and this may be more relevant to the local situation.

Moving Forward

This passage is sometimes referred to as the Isaiah Agenda. Discussion of it could easily occupy a complete Lent Course so for now you will need to pick one aspect. Now is your opportunity to explore an area of concern you may have not looked at before. Subjects could include

Children: problems of children and carers due to isolation and poor public transport; access to ante-natal classes, parenting classes, good quality childcare and education; lack of opportunity for children of all ages; anti-social behaviour.

Older People: the isolation of the non-driver; access to medical attention and hospital visiting; opportunities for socialising; provision of local care homes; bereavement and the practical aspects of being alone after a long marriage.

Housing: affordable rural housing; domestic help to stay at home when frail and elderly;

Economy: the pressures Supermarkets bring to bear on food producers; changes in patterns of agriculture;

Use the examples from **Seeds** and discuss how your church could get involved in one of the aspects in their local community.

Sources

The Isaiah Vision by *Raymond Fung*

Presence pp31-34 - various ways churches can get involved in their communities.

Seeds p24 - facilities for children; **pp30-34** - a range of community initiatives; **pp36-37** - examples of church building being used to provide community facilities.

For groups with more than one church

Focussing on us. Decide if you are going to make one display for all the churches or let each church do this individually. Encourage a sharing of the different ways the different churches undertake their prophetic ministry.

Explore the particular challenges your own setting brings: e.g. isolation, and its causes; shortage of care for older people.

Session4: The Evangelising Church

Leaders Notes

Suggested timings

10 minutes	Introduction and initial question
20 minutes	Focussing on us
30 minutes	Bible Study
20 minutes	Moving forward
10 minutes	Closing worship

Preparation needed

Focussing

If there are new people present you may need to quickly recap on the weeks before when you looked at the priestly and prophetic ministries of your church. Display your ideas in the form chosen last week.

Biblical background

The letter to Titus is one of the pastoral letters. They were written by Paul to Timothy and Titus giving them instructions on how to carry out the work that Paul has left them to do. For Titus this is the nurture of the young church on Crete.

Titus was converted by Paul and helped him considerably in his ministry. He was a Gentile and uncircumcised. The issue of circumcision was divisive at this time with many ex-Jews insisting that Gentiles undergo the rite in order to become acceptable. Paul stood against this view insisting that such traditions of the Jews had no place since the coming of Jesus. It is assumed that Titus worked with Paul at Ephesus. From there he was sent to Corinth to help that church. After Paul was released from his first imprisonment by the Romans he and Titus together worked at Crete. The result of their work there was a small but rowing church and Titus was commissioned to stay while Paul moved on. From the letter we see that Paul is sending a replacement and the second letter to Timothy mentions that Titus has moved to Dalmatia. It would appear that his work on Crete was successful and that he proved himself a capable and resourceful leader.

Titus is given particular advice on teaching 4 groups of people.

- Older men
- Older women so that they can train the younger women
- Young men
- Slaves

For all groups the emphasis is on sound teaching that will encourage members of the church to lead praiseworthy lives.

Depending on the church there may be an overlap with the groups chosen here and the areas of work highlighted in the previous session. If this happens you may wish to remind the group of any conclusions reached in the previous session. It is not essential for there to be such an overlap.

Moving Forward

The discussion should focus on times when the church comes into contact with other people e.g. through baptisms or funerals, at social events such as Harvest Supper or summer fete and festivals such as Christmas. Where appropriate introduce examples from Seeds in Holy Ground or from your own experience to show how other churches have used such encounters for evangelism.

Sources

Seeds pp16-18 - Baptism; **pp23-25** - children and young people; **p.28** - Rogation and other celebrations; **pp36-38** - alternative uses for the building.

For groups with more than one church

Focussing on us. Decide if you are going to make one display for all the churches or let each church do this individually. Encourage a sharing of the different ways the different churches undertake their evangelistic ministry.

Session 5: Ready to Grow?

Leaders Notes

Suggested timings

15 minutes	Introduction and initial question
20 minutes	Focussing on us
30 minutes	Bible Study
20 minutes	Moving forward
5 minutes	Closing worship

Sources 1

Seeds. Read those parts you have not already read. You may wish to refresh your memory on those sections you have already used. Ensure you are familiar with the material you choose to use. You will need all the materials gathered & prepared over the previous 4 weeks, plus notes of the discussions.

Preparation needed

Resources include the buildings, funds and – most importantly – people and their gifts. You may also wish to consider community resources that might be used by the church. You need to prepare a list of the 12 topics covered by **Seeds**; maybe even make a table with a 13th – blank – space at the bottom.

Biblical background

This is the first of 2 letters written by Peter, the apostle of Jesus. There is no time to recap the whole of Peter's story – as told through the Gospels and Acts. The fisherman turned apostle had a tendency to rush into things and occasionally to put his foot into it. But he also had great insights including recognising Jesus as the Messiah. He denied Jesus before his crucifixion but was forgiven in one of the resurrection meetings. After his speech at Pentecost, Peter became an authoritative leader in the early church. The letter was written not to one church, but to several in the province of Asia Minor. These are named at the beginning of the letter.

The passage to be studied contains words of encouragement for the church. Its members are described in various ways:

- A chosen people. In the Old Testament the Israelites were God's chosen people. In the New Testament all believers inherit the title – whether Jew or Gentile.
- A royal priesthood. Priesthood is no longer reserved for a select few, it is the role of all believers. Royalty, too, is for all.
- A holy nation. Holy means set apart. Believers are seen as one nation independent of their birthplace or ethnicity.
- People belonging to God. Emphasising their place as the ones chosen by God to receive his grace & favour.
- Aliens and strangers in the world. Believers have their citizenship, even while dwelling on earth.

Moving Forward

Give an opportunity for group members to reflect on the 12 topics covered by **Seeds**. Get them to choose the three they would like to explore in more detail. They may even want to insert a new topic of their own – which might reflect your discussions during Session 3. Collate all the choices together on a flip-chart so everyone can see the results. There may be clear agreement on the highest priorities, or there may need to be some discussion about different choices and priorities. Stress that there are no right or wrong choices. There is a lot of material in **Seeds**, and you must be careful that people don't try to tackle too much too soon. This can lead to unrealistic plans, overload and a sense of failure if all is not achieved.

You can also use the list to decide how to take this course – and the results you have obtained – forward. If you decide to look further at **Seeds**, you will need to decide carefully how to do this. You may look at only one topic later in the year, and others in subsequent years.

You may wish to consider, at a later date, using a further workbook developed for rural churches. This is **Making Connections** (from the Arthur Rank Centre – www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications-and-resources/making-connections) that develops the community-engaging aspects of the mission of rural churches. It focuses on: working with others; land & buildings; including young people; sharing faith; working with schools & creative worship.

For groups with more than one church

The community. Where the churches represented are in different communities you can stay in one group for the initial question but may wish to break into single community groups for the information gathering. Each church will need to draw up their own list of priorities and plans. It may be helpful for churches to share these with each other at some point. Especially if churches are connected to each other, e.g. in the same benefice or circuit, then some degree of mutual planning may be both necessary and possible.