

# Growing Together



What do you think of when you hear the word 'growth'? Perhaps you think of the children in your family and their development from dependent babies to capable, creative teenagers. Maybe you're a gardener, lovingly tending seeds from germination through potting on to planting out. Or you might be a rural entrepreneur watching a business you dreamed of become a reality.

But nothing grows in isolation. A rural entrepreneur needs customers, suppliers and a network of supportive family and friends. Plants need nutrients, water and sunlight. And it takes a village to raise a child.

The idea of growing together appears throughout the Bible but one of the most powerful images is that of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). When a baby emerges from her mother we have no expectation that she is the finished article, that she knows how to 'be' in this new world. We know she will grow, change and develop; we also know this process will take time.

Is the same true of the Body of Christ? Those who are 'hands' discover over time what that means, what the role requires, what their 'hand' is uniquely able to achieve when it is working effectively with the 'brain' and the 'arm'. In a human body a hand might, with the help and cooperation of the arm and the brain, develop extraordinary artistic skills, producing astonishing works of art; with a different arm and brain, and in partnership with strong and athletic legs, it can control and manipulate a tennis racket, producing sublime stroke play and match-winning drop shots.

And that's the key to the image of the body: not only does each individual part need others in order to fulfil its potential; it simply can't exist without them. As 1 Corinthians 12:21 reminds us, one part cannot say to another, 'I don't need you'. The reality is that no one has all the gifts that the church requires and, conversely, everyone has a gift to share. Gifts are given to individuals for the benefit of the whole body. The idea of unity and variety is fundamental to the body of Christ. For Paul, Christian identity is corporate; individual faith is important but has to be expressed as part of the wider church.

For Rural Mission Sunday, 15 July 2018 we're encouraging rural churches across the denominations to explore what it means to grow together. The materials we've produced will help churches explore what growth might look like and who might help them to grow. You'll find eight pages of Rural Mission Sunday resources in the centre of this issue of Country Way. Why not take some time with a small group and explore the Bible passages we've included:

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27  
One body with many parts: growing together as a local church
- Mark 10:13-16  
Jesus blesses little children: growing together with children and young people
- Acts 2:42-47  
The Fellowship of the believers: growing in number
- Mark 6:6-13  
Jesus sends out the Twelve: growing together as a team
- John 17:20-26  
Jesus prays for all believers: growing together across denominations
- Jeremiah 29:7  
Growing together with others in our communities.

How then do we develop our gifts and grow as disciples? We need to encourage each other about the gifts we have and give people opportunities to do something new. A lady in her 80s spoke in church for the first time when she was invited to help lead the prayers of intercession one Sunday. As we become confident of our gifts and our own faith journeys we can begin to share our story with others, as through us God grows the church.

Disciples aren't just for Sunday of course. Many Christians are involved in all kinds of community activity which can make a real difference to those around them. We are not always good at celebrating and supporting these people and often struggle to make the connection between what we do and what we believe. As St John Chrysostom pointed out, 'nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours.'

How can we better make those links? When gathering for worship why not ask members of the congregation what they will be doing this time tomorrow and pray for them? We also need to find ways of praying meaningfully for the communities of which we are a part. How can you reflect the hopes and concerns of your neighbours as you gather for worship?

Working together across the denominations is key to effective Christian 'togetherness'. This is not about filling gaps in our resources but living out a commitment to Christian unity so that, as John 17:21 reminds us, the world might believe. How can the churches of different denominations in your community work more closely together? If there is only one denomination with a worshipping presence in your community how can you welcome individual Christians of other denominations?

In a small market town, the midweek knitting group at the Methodist Church is actively supported by someone who worships at a large town church on a Sunday. The group is a real support to those who feel lonely and its mission is enhanced by those of different denominations working together.

It is vital that we learn to work across the generations; there is much adults can learn from children and young people! We have developed a specific children's resource for Rural Mission Sunday which offers some simple and practical ways of engaging with the children in your community.

But the Church cannot do everything, and neither should it try. Just as Jeremiah challenged the exiles to pray for the city in which they found themselves, we need to both pray for and work with other groups for the benefit of the whole community. In Broadchalke, a partnership between the United Reformed Church and the local Anglican church evolved into a community project as the URC building was refurbished to create a new home for the village store, which was otherwise threatened with closure. The community continues to work together to maintain the shop, worship still takes place and the congregation is beginning to grow.

So for Rural Mission Sunday 2018 we're extending some challenges. There's a challenge to grow deeper with God through discipleship and with each other as we spend time together exploring how we might better become the Body of Christ in our own communities. There's a challenge to grow in our relationships with our local community, with other churches, community groups and schools. There's a challenge to grow in our relationships with those of other faiths, exploring both our differences and those things we hold in common.

But above all there's a challenge to grow in number through evangelism as we step out and share the good news of Jesus with a world that desperately needs a transformational encounter with the Messiah whose Body we are called to be in the world.

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