



Pilling St John the Baptist, in Morecambe Bay

In 2014, Pilling St John the Baptist in Morecambe Bay and the Parish of Over Wyresdale in the forest of Bowland were invited to work with the ARC on a project exploring rural isolation and loneliness

Around twenty people from the local community, representing churches, charities, local business, and the parish council came together to highlight key issues facing the area and begin to identify potential solutions.

As a result of this project, Pilling parish church now runs a food bag scheme, a term chosen to distinguish the initiative from nearby 'foodbanks' which are more formal and occasionally a little admin-heavy. This is a simple, mercy-focused, scheme with drop off points for produce around the village. A volunteer from the village collects the produce and takes it to the church. Another volunteer bags the food up and ensures that there are a couple of bags, each containing a day's food for a family, in the porch at all times. We don't monitor how the service is used, but we do know that the food is going to those who really need it.

Other activities, including bereavement support, dementia awareness sessions, prayers for healing at the local pottery and the formation of a team of pastoral visitors have followed. These are all run by local volunteers and focus on local need. The latest initiative is Helping Hands, connecting volunteers from the local church with those who need help and support: transport for medical appointments, collection of shopping or prescriptions, or a lift to local church services. While we recognise that there will always be more that we can do, we are grateful that Arthur Rank Centre project gave us the kick-start we needed to start doing something about the isolation issues we all face.

The Parish of Over Wyresdale, Trough of Bowland.

The Parish of Over Wyresdale is situated, approximately seven miles from Lancaster and is in the Forest of Bowland, which has been designated an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. It forms part of the United Benefice of Dolphinholme, Quernmore and Over Wyresdale. The hamlet of Abbeystead is the main meeting point in the Parish, along with the church, for social events and fellowship. Despite being part of a vast shooting estate, where most of the dispersed population work either on the estate or as majority tenant farmers, there is a strong sense of community.

During the isolation research project, local families were invited to meet at Abbeystead School to explore feelings of isolation and to suggest how this might best be overcome. Parents met in one group and children in another. The strong feeling was that, whilst the small village Primary School did much to support the younger children, once they started travelling to High Schools in the local towns, there was nothing for them in Abbeystead. There is no public transport in any of the three parishes that make up the Benefice and so teenagers must rely on family for lifts etc if they wish to meet up with friends. At the time that the project took place, Rural Broadband had not yet reached the Benefice and so even contact online with friends was a challenge!

<https://arthurankcentre.org.uk/mission/rural-isolation-and-loneliness-toolkit/>

The outcome of the project was that, through the church, a Youth Club was set up. This met in the Village Hall at Abbeystead, once a month, and young people from around the Benefice were invited to join. Grants and donations poured in as the locals recognised a real need for the Youth Club.

The club continues to run, though has recently changed leaders. As the original members grow older and move on, there is now a need to advertise the club more widely and to encourage new members. Confirmation candidates formed the core of the original group but this needs a far wider reach now that the Club is well established. The intention now is to do more trips, residentials, visits etc, so that the young people have the opportunity to enjoy some of the activities that are not so readily available to youngsters growing up in rural locations. We also value the opportunity to give our young people a voice and so two of them attend PCC meetings to report on the 'youth angle' and they are also on the Diocesan Youth Council. It is important that the needs of rural young people are recognised at every level and our two representatives are good at making themselves heard! The new Benefice website is about to be launched and will include blogs by our young people.

The most significant recent development has been the 'Youth Club for Minis'. This runs straight after school, once a month, on the same Friday as the club for older members, in the Village Hall. It is aimed at Primary aged children, and replaces the traditional Sunday School. Average attendance is 18 children, which is substantial for a small parish. The children love it, as they have something that mirrors what the older children have! The hope is that, as the children get older, they will move into the Senior Youth Club.

As with any Youth Club, there have been weeks when attendance has been low and it is easy to get despondent. However, experience shows that youth work moves in waves and so it is important to keep the faith and keep at it!