



The
United
Reformed
Church

The **Methodist** Church 

A Discipling **PRESENCE**

*A workbook to help promote
and sustain an effective Christian
presence in rural communities*



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an effective Christian presence in rural communities*



Contents

Contributors	5
Foreword	7
Commendations	8
Introduction	10
How to use this resource	13
1 Rural People, Rural Church	15
2 RSVP – Saying ‘Yes’ in the Rural Church	19
3 Rural Ecumenical Cooperation	25
4 Developing Rural Worship	29
5 Buildings as Tools for Mission	33
6 Effectively Engaging Rural Communities	37
7 Rural Faith Journeys and Discipleship	40
8 Connecting Children and Young People	45
9 What if ...	51
Further Reading and Bibliography	56

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Foreword

“Every community, if it is to be whole, balanced and healthy, needs at its heart a committed group of Christians.”

The narrative around the rural Church can be quite negative at times, and yet we know that rural churches can and do make a significant difference to their communities. In 2004 the concept of an effective Christian presence in the countryside was articulated. It stated that “every community, if it is to be whole, balanced and healthy, needs at its heart a committed group of Christians” (Methodist Church 2004:14).

This concept has been taken up across the denominations as we look for ways of sustaining such a presence in our rural communities. We believe that ecumenical working is crucial. One of the strengths of this book is that it is written by a wide range of rural practitioners from the United Reformed and Methodist Churches incorporating insights from each tradition. We would like to encourage churches to find ways of using *A Discipling Presence* ecumenically.

Whilst there is much to celebrate in the rural Church, things cannot remain as they are. We need to make the most of the resources we have in both buildings and people, and to embrace different ways of meeting together for mission. Change is a constant reality in rural areas as it is elsewhere, but rural churches and their communities are adaptable. As we grasp new ways of working, and form new partnerships, our rural churches can look to the future with confidence.

Across the churches there are new initiatives in discipleship, both in terms of developing the faith of our members and in making new disciples. By working through *A Discipling Presence* congregations can gain in confidence and be encouraged to do both these things for the sake of God’s kingdom.



The Revd Bruce Thompson
The Revd Ruth Whitehead

*Joint Chairs, the Rural Strategy Group of the
Methodist and United Reformed Churches*

Commendations

“I am totally committed to seeing the Methodist Church grow in every area of the United Kingdom. Growth in rural areas of the country is absolutely vital if we are to maintain and develop an effective Christian witness. We need to be intentional both in nurturing disciples and prioritising growth, and that applies just as much to rural settings as anywhere else.

“Ministering in a rural setting can be both a great joy and a real challenge. This important new resource celebrates rural discipleship and offers real down to earth advice to respond to the need to be the good news of Jesus in the countryside. It is a very welcome addition to the tools we have in the Church that enable us to take some risks in our mission and discipleship in order to help us grow. The tools offered in this resource are practical, achievable and distinctly appropriate for those working in rural areas.

“Those who have written this resource speak from experience and do so with passion, conviction and wisdom. Each of the chapters encourages us, challenges us and offers some pointers about how we can better make disciples in the rural Church. It will appeal to those working in a wide variety of rural contexts and I warmly recommend it to you.”

The Revd Loraine Mellor,
President of the Methodist Conference
2017/2018

“Jesus was at home in the countryside. So are his churches. We are glad and grateful to be present in small towns, villages and the rural communities of our land. For anyone involved in rural church life, this book offers food for thought, confidence in God and hope for the future. It’s realistic and practical. It won’t impose other people’s answers on your local situation. But it might enable you to build on other people’s experience, and to find what helps in your own place. It’s written by people who care, who know and respect rural life, and who believe that your local church has a big contribution to make in the community where you live, serve and worship.”

The Revd John Proctor,
General Secretary,
the United Reformed Church

“This timely and encouraging publication asks us all in the rural Church to take risks. Sharing the good news of the risen life of Jesus Christ with those who are yet to hear it, means taking risks. For those of us who are risk averse this could be very challenging; for others it will be an opportunity to do new and exciting things. If we are to move beyond a passive presence to one that is focused on worship, service and evangelism then we need to risk taking a step of faith into the future. This book will help you to do this.”

Canon Dr Jill Hopkinson,
National Rural Officer,
Church of England, Archbishops’ Council

“I love the phrase ‘an effective discipling presence’ because that is the number one challenge for churches. It’s true everywhere, but especially for the geographic communities that make up our countryside. This practical and encouraging resource is therefore of critical importance for churches from all denominations as we seek to renew, restore and reinvent how to be salt and light in our villages.”

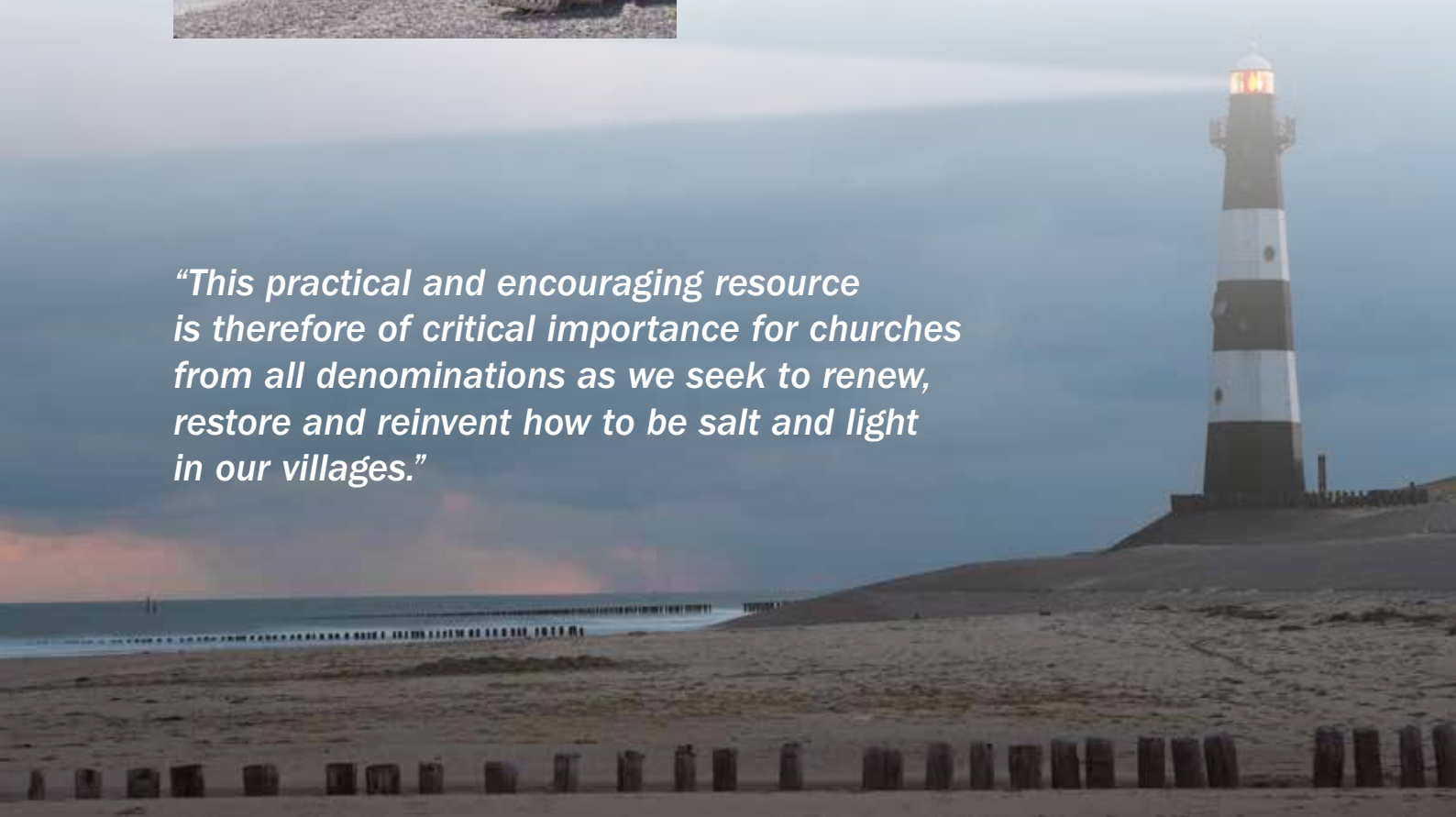
Jerry Marshall,
CEO, Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre

“This is an excellent resource, written by people who know what it is like to be church in the rural context. Written from the conviction that every community needs at its heart a group of committed Christians, this workbook offers a wealth of practical, down to earth and creative advice for churches who want to make their presence more effective. For churches who want to grow in discipleship and enable their wider community to flourish this book is a must.”

Francis Brien,
Deputy General Secretary (Mission),
the United Reformed Church



“This practical and encouraging resource is therefore of critical importance for churches from all denominations as we seek to renew, restore and reinvent how to be salt and light in our villages.”



Introduction



It can feel as if the countryside we see today has been this way forever, but it has always been a place of change. The landscape, so diverse in this country, is a result of generations of management by farmers and other landowners. Similarly, rural communities have changed over time, perhaps most notably during the Industrial Revolution, when large numbers of people left rural areas to work in the new towns and cities.

Approximately 18% of the population of England and Scotland, and 20% of the Welsh population live in rural areas. In Britain the countryside is seen as a desirable place to live and this has led, particularly in this century, to a net inward migration from urban areas. People move to the countryside for many reasons; sometimes as a place of retirement, but equally as a good place to bring up their families.

Rural communities are very varied, and the distinction between rural and urban is becoming less clear cut. There has been an increase in the number of commuter villages. Some rural areas attract large numbers of tourists. Some are very affluent; others experience real poverty. There is also an increasing economic dependency between urban and rural areas. While most of the countryside is concerned with food

production, it is also a place of leisure and this can sometimes lead to tensions.

The official (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) definition of 'rural' in England and Wales is a community of less than 10,000 people. This figure falls to less than 3,000 in Scotland. The rural population has a higher age profile than urban areas, particularly in more remote areas. Young people in the 16-34 age range are present in smaller numbers than in urban areas. Often this is due to the lack of housing and employment opportunities. For those children and young people in rural communities, transport to activities can be a big problem. Many secondary-school children will be bussed to school and their social networks will be beyond their immediate community. There is a challenge and an opportunity here for the Church in seeking to bring children and young people together for activities and events.

Many of the issues around poverty and deprivation are the same as for urban people. However, accessing help can be harder since people are more dispersed. Outside of London and the South East, rural housing is more expensive than urban areas and wages can be lower. Work can be seasonal and people may have more than one job. Many businesses in

10



rural areas are small or micro businesses. Whilst for the majority life in the countryside is good, there are problems such as accessing services and isolation, as well as economic deprivation. Again these factors offer both challenges and opportunities for the rural Church.

Having looked at the rural context, let us consider the place of the Church in rural communities. In 2004, *Presence: a workbook to help promote and sustain an effective Christian presence in villages* was published. The starting point for this document was the belief that “every community, if it is to be whole, balanced and healthy, needs at its heart a committed group of Christians” (Methodist Church 2004:14). This view is echoed by research which shows that rural Christians are good at volunteering in their communities and by so doing make a significant contribution to the flourishing of those communities (Farnell et al 2006; Grieve et al 2007).

However, we know that many rural churches of all denominations seem very fragile so it cannot be ‘business as usual’ if we are to sustain an effective Christian presence in the countryside. This concept was articulated in 2004 and encouraged us to look at different ways of being church in rural communities. It calls us to be

ecumenical, to look again at when and where we worship and to encourage lay leadership. It also encourages us to look at worship, service, and evangelism in the life of our churches. We wish to add another focus to this, that of making and growing disciples, we are called to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), which, of course, includes rural communities. The idea of an effective discipling presence is one we will use as a framework throughout this resource.

Firstly, we need to be ecumenical: how we achieve this will vary in different communities. At the minimum it has to be a commitment not to do apart what we can do together. In some places there may be the capacity to support two buildings, with the congregations working together on mission. In others with only one church building, ecumenism will be about welcoming those from different denominations to worship and serve together. Sometimes two or more churches may choose to join together formally to maintain the Christian life and witness in their community. In the chapter on ecumenism you will read more about ecumenical working at all levels in the countryside.

The nature of Sunday has changed and Sunday worship may no longer be appropriate for some

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“We believe ecumenical working is crucial.”

communities. There is a need to embrace worship at different times to fit the needs of the present age. Whilst buildings can be a positive resource, there are undoubtedly too many church buildings and we need to be intentional about those we keep and those we close. Congregations already worship in community buildings like village halls, schools or pubs. This can be liberating for a congregation allowing them to focus on the mission of God, rather than maintaining a building.

However, we also need to be open to the potential of our buildings. They can be an important witness to our faith, as we host activities which benefit the community and provide sacred space.

With ordained ministers in short supply and working with larger groups of churches the role of ministers has to change. As *Presence* noted back in 2004:

“The churches will be local and led by lay people but enabled by ordained ministers who will be itinerant rather than parish-based. The ministers will move between the congregations enabling, training and constantly reminding each congregation who and whose they are and helping the church to grow spiritually, theologically and practically.”

(Methodist Church 2004:12)

This may sound radical for some, but is it not about rediscovering the past? Many non-conformist churches have a proud tradition of lay leadership. It is also not about ‘filling gaps’ but enabling the ministry of the whole people of God: the priesthood of all believers outlined in the First Letter of Peter (1 Peter 2:5).

The concept of an effective discipling presence also gives us a way of thinking about the life of a church centred around worship, service, evangelism and learning and caring. Discipleship needs to be at the centre of what the Church does. Worship needs to connect with and reflect the life of our communities. Service is more than just about taking part in community activities and being good neighbours. It is also about issues of social justice and at times requires us to ask hard questions. We need to find new ways of telling the story of faith as we engage in discipleship in our communities. Being ‘present’ in this way – as an effective discipling presence – is not about being passive, but about seeing where God is working and joining in. It is about being God-centred communities who are an intrinsic part of the wider community helping it to flourish.

12



How to use this resource



This book is aimed at anyone who has an interest in seeing the kingdom of God become more tangible in rural settings. It is designed to support Christians so that they can live out their faith at the heart of their rural communities. We hope it will help people think about their place in, and mission to, the community of which they are a part. It is hoped this resource is an encouragement, a challenge, a prayer and the basis of a manifesto for future rural ministry.

It has been written by a team of people who are passionate about faith in the rural context. Some of these people are ordained ministers, some are not. They are rural practitioners from both the Methodist Church and United Reformed Church (URC) who have wrestled with the issues confronting them as they seek to work out what it means to be 'an effective discipling presence' (ie making and growing disciples) in their own communities. We will use this phrase throughout to describe what we believe God is calling us to.



Also included in the resource are some quotations. These are things those living and ministering in rural contexts have said during the preparation of this book. We felt it important to include a wide range of perspectives, and the quotes are offered without any comment or additional explanation.

The book can be read as a whole, but each chapter can also be read as a stand-alone piece. This opens up lots of creative possibilities about how it can be used. You could, for example, pick four or five chapters and use them as a basis for a Lent Course. For a season, you could orientate the teaching and preaching programme around the themes of the chapters. You could use the material as the basis for home group discussions, items in church newsletters, prayers and/or as a personal daily set of study notes.

As well as an effective discipling presence being an overall framework for this resource, there are



also one or two other common elements that can be found in each of the chapters. For example, each chapter has a section entitled, 'From God's word'. These sections are designed to root our discussions and thoughts in the present reality of what the Bible might be saying to us. The authors have not sought to offer in-depth or academically-focused theological discussions, but down to earth reflections from Scripture that help engage us in what is being talked about.

Similarly, each chapter contains a number of exercises. These have been written so they can be simply undertaken on your own. However, we would not wish to limit them to this. They could be done with others in pairs, in a small group setting, or over a cup of coffee with a friend. They could be considered as exercises the local church could undertake. Simply adjust what is asked to suit the particular context in which you are engaged. Each section also contains some practical things to do. We have entitled these examples 'Why not?'; they are simple examples of what can be undertaken to promote effective discipleship in a rural context.

We have concluded each chapter with opportunities for 'Further reading and resources'. These are books, articles and web resources which the authors have found helpful in their work

and ministry. They are presented for those who wish to engage in further study and reflection.

When writing a resource that seeks to break new ground, it can appear that one or two things come across as contradictory. We do not apologise for this, but wish to alert you to this possibility. For example, there is a chapter on how to use the church building, but we also suggest you might not need a church building; we talk about how to grow the rural Church, but value the smallness of it; we seek to support and develop what is known as 'the inherited church', but also encourage the starting of new pioneering types of church (like Fresh Expressions); and we suggest lay people be at the forefront of being an effective discipling presence, yet refer to ordained ministers quite a lot! We talk a lot about traditional church, but we also explore newer forms of being church, like Café Church and Messy Church. Wrestling with what God might be up to in the many and varied contexts of the rural Church, is both a big challenge and a fantastic opportunity. We hope you will join with us in considering what you might not have considered before and praying through what we believe are Spirit-inspired and exciting manifestations of God's calling.

We also hope that you will read what is written prayerfully; reflect upon it and undertake some action as a result.

The editorial team

Chapter 1: Rural People, Rural Church

Exploring what it means to be 'rural' and what a rural 'effective discipling presence' is

Defining 'rural'?

"There is a tension between people wanting 'rural' holidays and homes and the need to have ongoing communities."

What do we mean by the term 'rural'? Many of us instinctively know if somewhere feels rural, but the nature of rural communities has always been changing. Many villages near to large towns are now home to commuters. Some villages have high proportions of seasonally-occupied second homes and holiday lets. In other areas there are large numbers of migrant workers living and working in rural communities. Many people who don't live in rural areas have an idealised picture of what 'rural' is like: pretty villages, green fields, no dirt, noise, or problems. Those who live in rural areas will be well aware of the issues and challenges of living in the countryside.

Exercise: The way we do things around here

How well do you know your community?

- Draw a map or diagram of your community including any services there may be, such as shops, pubs, maybe a school, and housing.
- What is your experience of living in this community?
- What are the joys and the challenges?
- Try and look at the community from the viewpoint of someone different – an older person, a child, a parent at home with a family, an unemployed person. How do you think they view the community?

Hopefully this exercise has proved that you know your community and are aware of the positives and negatives of living where you do. Take the time to try and fill any gaps in your knowledge. If, as we believe, every community if it is to be healthy needs at its heart a group of committed Christians, how do we enable an effective discipling presence today? It may be ecumenical, may not worship on a Sunday, or in its own building; but what will be its main characteristics? As mentioned, this book is about being an effective discipling presence in the countryside. Such a presence will have worship at its heart, find new ways of evangelism and be involved in service so that we make disciples.

"The line between the public and private life of the rural minister is blurred: removing your clerical collar does not signify that you are off duty. A trip to the shops or a visit to the pub in your town or village on your day off will invariably end with a pastoral conversation and to refuse to engage, no matter how politely, can easily be seen as the Church turning its back in time of need."

Valuing worship

Worship is the heart of what we do and who we are as Christians, but we have not always valued it as we should. However, "worship, prayer and the celebration of the sacraments offered faithfully and lovingly in the heart of the community enriches everyone" (Methodist Church 2004:13). We need to pray intentionally for our community and reflect the life of that community in our worship. Our church buildings

need to be open and provide a space for those outside the Church to be welcomed. The provision of a quiet space in a busy world can be valuable and may enable an encounter with God.

Worship is vital to the life and mission of the Church since, “it is in worship that disciples are formed and transformed” (Walton 2014:26). The reality is that worship will have to be increasingly resourced locally. The challenge is to see this as an opportunity for the transformation of disciples rather than a way of plugging gaps.

Telling the good news

If we are to make effective rural disciples, we need to find new ways of telling the story and sharing the good news. More often than not, everyone knows who goes to church in a small rural community. This can make it difficult to speak about the things that matter such as our faith. However, it does mean that people may ask us questions. In this context evangelism is

about being able to answer the questions that arise naturally as we share in the life of the community. We need to make the link with what we do and what we believe.

Evangelism may also be about taking the story outside the church walls through activities such as Good Friday processions, Harvest Festival celebrations, outdoor, carol or nativity services. There are many opportunities in both the Church and rural calendars for us to take our worship and witness outside the building. What is the community already doing and how can the Church join in appropriately to share who it is and what it is about? How can the Church help to add meaning and depth to community activities?

Good service

Both ‘worship’ and ‘evangelism’ are referred to in more depth in other chapters. So let us look at what we mean by ‘service’. This, of course, begins with the ordinary care and concern that we show for our neighbours, but it doesn’t stop there. It also encompasses roles we take in the wider community; anything from serving on the Parish Council, to running the local fete. In all these activities we will be seen as ‘the Church’ and there may be opportunities to speak out about matters that concern us as well as forge partnerships with other groups and individuals.

‘Service’ may start with being part of the community and active within it, but it doesn’t end there. It is also about social justice: “to affirm that ‘God is love’ is to be a person concerned about the profound inequalities in the world” (Smith 2008:55). We know it can be hard to speak out, not just about faith matters, but about any issue facing a small community. We may be anxious and not want to appear to be ‘taking sides’. This dilemma is not new, after all the Gospels are rural documents as this Bible study reminds us.





From God's word

The word 'village' appears 18 times in the Gospels and its plural another 11 times. It is clear from many of the stories Jesus told just how rural both his communities and the Gospels are.

Read Luke 4:16-24 which begins with Jesus at home.

- How was Jesus treated? What does this tell you about speaking out and sharing the good news? (You may need to read verses 28-30 as well to get the full picture.)
- What do verses 18 and 19 say to you?
- How do you feel about speaking out within the community?

Jesus is talking about good news. What might be 'good news' for your community? If you are not sure what some of the issues are then why not talk to some of the key people and organisations in your community such as the Parish Council? Could you do a community audit? Some examples of how to do this are found in *Equipping for Rural Mission* (see further reading and resources at the end of the chapter).

Acknowledging the challenges

Many of the issues facing rural communities are complex and a small church is unlikely to solve them all on its own, but there are ways of making a

difference. Isolation is a key problem that churches should be able to tackle by being intentional about providing hospitality in various ways. Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre has produced a rural isolation resource, see <http://germinate.net/resources/rural-isolation-project-resource>.

Poverty is also a real issue in the countryside, but it is often hidden as people don't want everyone to know that they are struggling. Foodbanks, for example, may have to operate differently than in urban contexts. In some cases the main foodbank may be in a town or larger village, and food will need to be delivered by a network of local church members.

One church, Naunton in the Cotswolds, acts as the centre of a distributing foodbank. Naunton Chapel was aware of the needs of people in the surrounding area but its building is in a very small village. By working with partner churches in other villages and small towns, Naunton acts as the warehouse for the food contributions, and makes sure that the outlets in the other areas are well stocked. They have a key role despite their remote location in "acting together as an expression of the body of Christ across a rural area" (<http://germinate.net/resources/rural-foodbanks/>). By working together like this they have also been able to help local people see beyond the rural idyll and understand some of the challenging issues facing people.

Part of the role of the Church is to help people understand their communities but also to see

beyond the local to the wider world. This can be grounded in very practical ways. Being a Fairtrade church and going on to challenge the wider community to be a Fairtrade village for example; prioritising the use of locally produced food; or supporting an international charity and getting the village to help through community fundraising. Try to be creative and have some fun as you live out the values of God's kingdom.



Exercise:

What one thing?

Think about the four areas of being an effective discipling presence; worship, service, evangelism, and learning and caring. What one new thing could you do in each category, over the next six months?

Why not?

In worship use the idea of 'this time tomorrow' as a way of praying for the Church and wider communities. Ask people what they will be doing this time tomorrow and pray for that person and situation.

Do something specific for your community as a gift. For example, why not ask the church to organise a litter-pick? They could all pray as they walk and litter-pick around the community.

Use one of the church festivals or community festivals to take the good news story outside of the church walls. For example, rather than hold the annual November Remembrance Service in the church building, why not hold it in a community space.

Further reading and resources

Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre contains a wide variety of resources, see www.germinate.net.

Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre, *Equipping for Rural Mission* (Coventry, The Arthur Rank Centre, 2017) (Available from <http://www.germinate.net/mission/equipping-for-rural-mission>)

A Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission* (London, Mowbray, 2003)

A Smith, *God-Shaped Mission: Theological and Practical Perspectives from the Rural Church* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2008)

R L Walton, *Disciples Together: Discipleship, Formation and Small Groups* (London, SCM Press, 2014)



Chapter 2: RSVP – Saying ‘Yes’ in the Rural Church

Thinking about some things that will increase everybody's confidence in making rural disciples

Let's say 'yes'

It might be an obvious thing to say, but Jesus was remarkable. The way he went about discipleship was also remarkable. In the places and at the time Jesus lived, it was the norm for a teacher or Rabbi to have disciples. The best potential young candidates would clamour to be with the best teachers in the same way that today, high-flying students seek out the best universities. However, Jesus' disciples were a most unlikely bunch; sceptics, those shunned by society, the fumbling, and the fallible.

Jesus showed them how he did things, spent time with them, empowered them, gave them confidence and then sent them out on their own. Jesus believed in them (even when they got it wrong) and in the God they served. We could all state hundreds of reasons why we might be disqualified from being a disciple of Jesus, but God sees it differently. God believes in us and has trusted us to build the kingdom. We have been given the keys and invited to go into all the world and make disciples. God says 'yes' to those wanting to be disciples. This belief underpins what is written in this book.

The next few pages set out some thoughts, reflections and ideas for practical action. However, what is presented only works if ordinary people in rural locations respond to the call to go and make disciples. Observation suggests that some people await permission before doing anything in life. Furthermore, experience suggests that we can too easily end up being passive recipients of what is on offer on a Sunday rather than enterprising and active disciples each and every day. This resource wants to give you permission, and seeks to encourage enterprise and endeavour, so that



everybody positively responds to the invitation to go and make disciples. Of course, we don't have any formal power to give permission for anything, but implore everybody to embrace a philosophy that wants to say 'yes' to ideas, initiatives and enthusiasm rather than find reasons to say 'no'. We invite ordinary people of all ages, abilities and personalities to RSVP and say 'yes' to making disciples in rural contexts.

Over to you

As we have already noted, the nature of rural ministry and who facilitates it is radically changing. This requires that everybody involved in the rural Church needs to play their part fully. Of course, this has always been the case, but it is more vital than ever that this is intentionally and strategically given prominence. Everybody in the rural Church needs to be invited to dream Godly dreams, embrace new vision and use their passions and skills like never before. Everybody is invited to take a lead.

Leadership is important – the editorial team for this resource suggests a leader is someone who has vision, says ‘yes’ to God and then does something about that by drawing in others, encouraging people and getting things done. But too many of our current leaders are tired and weary because they are relied on too much and asked to do the impossible. We need more people to rise up and say ‘yes’. Leaders are not just ministers, lay workers and those with job titles or specific roles, but people of all ages and backgrounds who are prepared to leave the comfort of their sofas and pews and get something done for the kingdom.

“There are just nine members in the church and five of these are aged 92+. However, we’ve been doing a weekly soup lunch for four years and undertaking ‘good neighbour acts’.”

20

The town of Rye has a Christmas festival. The Methodist Church has a small membership but they wanted to do some outreach despite their lack of person-power. Their minister suggested they do a Nativity Set Festival – inviting people to

loan nativity sets, displaying them, and opening the church for six hours a day. Church members stewarded the event and little preparation was needed apart from putting nativity sets on tables, window sills and at the front of the church, and then opening the doors. The minister said to the members that if 100 people came they should be delighted. Over 300 came. Many people engaged in theological conversations and the event was talked about across the town. The church members were amazed at the response and they are keen to do it next year – and make it bigger. Whilst the initial idea was the ministers, all the work was done by other people. This small, easy to undertake idea has encouraged a small church to take its context seriously and realise that outreach doesn’t have to be difficult.

Yes we can

In 2008 Barack Obama was elected President of the United States of America. He fought the election with a very simple slogan, “Yes we can”. He believed in people and his faith inspired him to believe in a better world. People living in rural contexts also need to believe in each other and as we serve God we are, by definition, challenged



to make the world better. We might not have the power of a President but we can do things that make things better for those we serve.

For example, the village of Wetheral commissioned a village audit and the Methodist Church reflected on the results. The audit showed a need for some village allotments. The Methodist Church was surrounded by a piece of land which they kept tidy, but did not use. The church felt that they could serve their community by offering this land for allotments. The ground was prepared and a number of allotments were created and received gladly by the village. At the following Harvest Festival, the allotment holders arrived on the Saturday to help decorate the chapel with produce they had grown. Many attended the service on Sunday and all because the church said “yes we can”.

Perhaps God might be inviting us to say “yes we can” and make a difference in the countryside where we live.

“We got a grant to put broadband internet into the church and now we have mornings teaching silver surfers how to use it!”



Exercise: Back and forwards

Sometimes we forget the things we have done well, but it is good to celebrate them before looking forward to what is next.

- Looking back, list things you have done well in your church and community.
- What was it that enabled you to do these things?
- Looking forward, what can you say “Yes we can” to?
- What steps do you need to take to develop the things you have identified?

Getting organised and taking a lead

Getting organised is one of the key requirements in moving from having conversations and good ideas to positive outcomes and real impact. Too many of our church meetings are dominated by lots of talk and good intentions, but too little action.

Eggborough Church is a good example of how getting organised in a fresh way can make a real difference. The congregation knew it was good at offering hospitality and used this to grow the mission of the church; the hospitality of a coffee morning led to worship. The superintendent knew she could not do everything and so found someone with pastoral gifts to enable others in the congregation.

The church had seen its Sunday morning congregations fall to sometimes less than four people and they felt things could not continue as they were. They held a regular Thursday coffee morning which was very popular and decided to worship before the coffee morning. The worship was ‘café style’ – which is a culturally attractive, informal and interactive contemporary approach aimed at younger people – using the church layout that people were familiar with. Numbers soon built up and there is now a regular congregation of between 20 and 30. Many of these people came from the coffee morning and have no church background.

Additionally, the church garden fulfils a role as a garden of remembrance and people plant tubs in memory of loved ones as the nearest crematorium is a long way away. The church has now also planted a new monthly Sunday ‘café’ church congregation. We need people who are willing to take a lead like this and get organised. If it is not going to be you, then who? If it is not now, then when?



From God's word

Read Paul's famous passage on love: 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13. (Or read the whole of chapter 13.)

These familiar words can sound a bit daunting if we really start to think about them. They are a reminder that love is not some shallow feeling, but rather the ability to look beyond someone's shortcomings and love them anyway. It is a call to want the best for others. If that sounds like a tall order, we need to remember that Paul wrote these words to an imperfect and quarrelsome congregation. We also should hang on to the knowledge that this is how God loves each of us.

- Look at the list in verses 4-7. What might these qualities look like in your situation?

22

Steve Aisthorpe (2016:164) said, "To grow as a Christian is, crucially, to grow in love. Churches are not only marked and motivated by love, they are also to foster love in the lives of believers."

- What might it look like if you say 'yes' to loving the church and community you live in?

Church, but not as we know it

In Cumbria the Methodist Church, Anglican Church, United Reformed Church and Salvation Army along with companion Churches are committed to forming ecumenical mission communities across the whole of the county. These act as an enabling and energising missional 'umbrella' in the vast rural geographical county, where the object is that by 2020 every person in Cumbria will have had an opportunity to discover more of God and God's purpose for their lives. In the ecumenical mission communities, ministry, mission and buildings are shared for the sake of the kingdom;



resources are used to the full. While the exact make-up may differ from area to area, they provide opportunities to enable people's gifts and ministries to flourish, establishing new expressions of Church alongside the traditional and ensuring there is a discipling presence in every place across Cumbria. The idea of 'Rural Ecumenical Cooperation' is considered more fully in the next chapter, but perhaps the very way we see local rural church requires some further thought.

"There is no one rural village like another and we need different approaches to mission for different churches."



Exercise:

What is church?

It might be that in many rural contexts the idea of a missional community – a small community of Christians (perhaps around 15-40) who come together around a shared and common vision in a



specific context in order to reach a specific group of people – may be a fruitful vision to pursue.

Spend a few moments thinking about ‘what church is’.

- Draw up a list of what you think the essentials of church are.

Peter Ball, Mission and Training Development Officer for Eastern Synod, URC has said:

“We live in times where worshipping communities look very different. These are often theological rather than denominational differences. However in order to be missional communities what needs to remain at their heart is that they reflect Jesus and his call to follow and be his disciples. This means being led by the example Jesus gave us in his own life, teachings and by his actions. Any Christian community that embraces this will automatically be missional in its life and witness. At the heart of being a missional community is a call to discipleship ... To live out the Christian life by Christ’s example has to lead us into service of the communities into which he has placed us ... To be relevant to this generation these communities may look and feel very different from traditional Church, but as we look more and more towards a mixed economy of Church it is being disciples and missional communities that matters rather than trying to fit into a traditional or orthodox pattern.”

- What do you think about what Peter says?
- Think about your church, to what extent is mission at the heart of everything you do?
- What might need to change so that your church can better reach out to its community?

Effective communication

If we are to make changes in how we develop Christian communities we need to be mindful

about how we communicate with each other. Different people in different generations send and receive communications differently. Different generations have different experiences about learning and levels of involvement. Contemporary leadership needs to be an enabling force that takes account of how people think, make decisions and behave. Our communication methods need to match the communication culture of the people we are seeking to engage. If we ignore or use a culturally misjudged form of communication, the messages we wish to send and receive can too easily get lost.

Consider how you communicate. Whilst some people still find written notices helpful others will use social media to communicate. Make sure you use the most culturally-appropriate method for the people you are seeking to engage. For example, a church in Nottinghamshire uses Facebook and bright posters to communicate about its Messy Church services. However, it uses the church magazine to tell older people in the other church services about what happens in Messy Church because they prefer to read articles about it and might not be on Facebook.

Being enterprising

Leading and communicating in an information age requires transformational leadership that promotes change. In short, the more enterprising we can be, the more likely it is that we will enable the rural Church to develop disciples and be sustainable. As part of inviting people to respond and say ‘yes’ to what God might be doing, we need to help people improve their thinking and make better decisions. Researcher Jim Collins encourages us not to settle for what we are doing now – even if it is good. In his book *Good to Great* (2001) he argues that we too easily settle for how things are, especially if they are good. He encourages us to pursue the great.

In our context, this involves managing change of all sorts, building relationships, being a listening ear, developing trust, improving pastoral care and promoting high quality leadership. The Listening Ear Project is a collaboration between the National Health Service and the clergy of local ecumenical mission communities. It began in rural North Cumbria in 2014 after seven years of collaboration and planning to ensure safeguarding and confidentiality boundaries were kept. It arose from the recognition of both the clergy and rural doctors (GPs) that there was need in some patients for more time to voice their feelings than the GPs could manage in their small rural units. It was recognised that the 'listening' would need to be done in a confidential and non-judgemental environment. Small communities know each other so therefore clergy and GPs are trusted to keep their counsel. A patient would be referred, with consent, by a GP or member of the surgery team to a member of the clergy. They then see the patient in the surgery for however many sessions are necessary for the well-being of the patient concerned. This might be a one-off conversation, or an ongoing conversation to support someone through various issues such as isolation, bereavement, or a big life-decision.

For the clergy this is a very rewarding role as it is an outworking of Christian faith in action in the community. For the GP, there is an increase in the well-being of patients who feel that they have been heard and helped to make sense of the issue. Being enterprising and saying 'yes' have become transformational.

Why not?

Develop a culture of encouragement in your church. A major UK supermarket invites its staff to send each other 'love cards' – simple cards staff can send colleagues as a way of appreciating and encouraging each other. Why not introduce a similar process in your church or community?

Set up a Facebook page or develop an information/pilgrimage booklet for your church – like Lorraine Brown has done for Tissington in the Peak District (www.lulu.com/gb/en/shop/lorraine-brown/tissington-a-village-pilgrimage/paperback/product-22622204.html).

Have a Nativity Set Festival similar to that undertaken by the church in Rye.

Further reading and resources

- P Ball, *A Pioneering God - for a Pioneering People - Being Church for Our Generation* (Cambridge, Eastern Synod, URC, no date)
- J Collins, *Good to Great* (London, Random House Business Books, 2001)
- I Parkinson, *Reignite: Seeing God Rekindle Life and Purpose in Your Church* (Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2015)
- N Pimlott (ed), *Change Management Training Resource: a Resource for Ministers, Leaders, Churches and Circuits* (written in 2016 and available on request from Methodist Church East Central Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network – www.methodist.org.uk/learning/network-regions/east-central-region)

Chapter 3: Rural Ecumenical Cooperation

Looking at new ecumenical models and partnerships within the wider community

Theological understanding

"The British Christian landscape is gloriously diverse. Traditional denominations sit alongside experimental and radical ways of being Church; the multicultural complexion of British society is reflected in the life of the churches, from congregations made up of 20 to 30 nations to those from one, whether black or white; the charismatic and Pentecostal experience counterpoints High Mass and sung evensong; traditional historic partnerships are being joined by collaborative ventures that would have been impossible a decade ago. A new spirit of 'togetherness' in Christ has been born."

(Tatem 2016:1)



From God's word

Our togetherness in Christ flows out of the gospel imperative that 'they should be one':

"I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:23)

These words are part of what is known as the high priestly prayer of Jesus found in John 17:1-26. This prayer of Jesus falls into three parts: verses 1-5 contain Jesus' prayer for himself; verses 6-19 give Jesus' prayer for his disciples; and verses 20-26 show Jesus' prayer for the Church. So far Jesus had concentrated on those whom he had taught, but then he turned to those who would believe through the disciple's testimony (John 17:20).



Jesus made no distinction between those people who had heard him personally and those who had heard of him through others. For both, the prayer is for unity. The pattern and example for unity is the relationship between the Father and the Son (John 17:21) and the basis of this relationship is evangelistic because it leads people to faith (John 17:23). Faith leads to unity and this unity leads others to faith.

- How is this theological understanding lived out in your local church?
- How is this theological understanding lived out between the denominations in your village?

Unity in diversity

There can be no doubt that those outside the Church see little or no significance in our denominationalism. Even within churches, there

is a trend that perceives God through a post-denominational and mission-community lens.

Notwithstanding this, relationships between churches in rural areas tend to be orientated around denominational groupings; sometimes they can be very positive and other times they can be more difficult. We have a vision of the Church as the people of God in the village being at one as a witnessing, serving community – that effective discipling presence we have mentioned already. If only from the viewpoint of resources, both people and buildings, it makes much sense to work together.

However, there are many practical aspects which make the ideal difficult in practice – for example, a loyalty to the past which would preserve old buildings and ways of worship; the memory of old prejudices and grievances; a rigidity of thought; a sense of identity in which there is a fear of being swamped by a majority. These can limit closer links and working with others who have a different perspective. Enjoying closer links does not necessarily mean that you are going to lose your identity.

In recent years denominations have thought a lot about their essential characteristics, their DNA. When you know why you are a member of your denomination you can become confident in your understanding. This can help overcome any fears you may have of working closely with other denominations.



Exercise: Different yet the same

If you can gather an ecumenical group of Christians together, spend some time reflecting upon the following questions:

- Why are you a Methodist? Why are you URC? Why are you Baptist? Why are you an

Anglican or whatever denomination? Make a list.

- What do these denominations have in common?
- What are the differences between these denominations?
- How then do we make disciples together?

"I believe each rural church has a specific mission to get involved with. Sometimes we need to help each other discover exactly what that mission is."

The importance of relationships

In rural areas 'localism' is important. Communities very often have strong local identities because of history and limited transport infrastructure. Sometimes – perhaps due to established industrial and commercial activity like mining, farming and tourism – there is a sense of pride which promotes common ground on which people can meet and positive local relationships can be maintained and strengthened.

'Isolation' can also be another significant element. This is especially true of areas like Argyll and Bute, Gwynedd, Cornwall and Lincolnshire that find themselves geographically on the edge (the photo right shows Gwennap Pit, Cornwall, where John Wesley preached 18 times between 1762 and 1789). All this makes 'local' more important, so churches often identify themselves with places rather than a denomination. For years in rural areas there have been many examples where churches have worked together and developed a mosaic of local ecumenical partnerships that are informal and non-structural. The basis for these is 'relational'. Relational ecumenism begins, not with shared doctrine or managing decline, but rather in seeing each other as children of God, created uniquely

and individually. Good relationships built on trust, respect, understanding and love are key to ecumenical working. Where these characteristics are not at the forefront, ecumenical working will never be what it should be.

In the Camborne and Redruth Methodist Circuit the vision was to provide continuity in ministry for three rural communities. A priest in charge of two Anglican parishes was authorised by the Methodist Conference to serve a Methodist chapel also. The priest in charge is known by all and ministers across the two denominations as the Christian minister in those three rural communities. Might a similar model be helpful where you live?

On mission

What is the point of rural ecumenism if it is not leading to a common mission in your area? In rural areas faith is often implicit, shown in practical works and relationships within the community. In a rural community church

members may not wish to be distinctive or stand out, since this can be seen as divisive. People who have been brought up locally may find it difficult to challenge the personal faith of relatives and lifelong neighbours. So in rural communities forms of mission need to be largely communal with the aim of drawing in the whole community to faith and discipleship. When this type of mission is prepared and engaged in together it can be a powerful witness to the gospel.

Grewelthorpe is a small village in North Yorkshire which had both a Methodist chapel and a parish church both with small congregations. The members of the Methodist church began to find the building impossible to maintain. They wanted more than anything to continue worshipping in their village. The two congregations came together, firstly by a covenant agreement, and then by a formal Local Ecumenical Partnership.



"As a rural chaplain, I might be the only person a farmer sees that day."

The school room of the Methodist church was sold and some of the money went to help build a new kitchen in the parish church where both Methodists and Anglicans now worship together. The Methodist church building is still owned by the Methodist Church but is leased to a village hall committee and has been converted into the village hall which hosts various activities.

One local farmer, David, said that going to church was now easier for him because he didn't have to choose which church to attend! He was a member of a Methodist farming family married to an Anglican. This meant he didn't feel he was letting his ancestors down when he went to the parish church now.



Exercise: Joint enterprise

Spend a few moments reflecting upon what Jesus intended when he said that his followers 'should be one'. Church history is littered with failure in this regard. If there is something you need to say sorry to God for in how you have regarded other Christian brothers and sisters

who come from a different tradition, spend a moment seeking forgiveness.

- What can you, in your community, learn from the example of Grewelthorpe?
- How might you along with others begin to form an ecumenical mission statement and plan and/or work towards developing a more ecumenical church?

Why not?

Pray for the leaders of other churches.

Have a cup of coffee with someone from another church and discuss how you could work together more effectively.

Find out what others are doing with a view to doing it together. You could, for example, cancel your Christingle Service (or any other service) and facilitate one jointly with another church.

Further reading and resources

J Bell, J Hopkinson and T Willmott (eds), *Re-Shaping Rural Ministry* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2009)

D Tatem et al, *A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission* (London, Churches Together in England, 2016)



Chapter 4: Developing Rural Worship

Worshipping in and with small congregations, valuing worship leaders and new ways of worship

The heart of worship

The previous version of *Presence* was passionate about every community needing to have at its heart an expression of Christian worship if that community was to be whole and healthy. In the years that have passed since that passion was expressed, life in our villages and the resources available has changed dramatically, but the need is still the same.

“Finding engaging ways to be a Christian presence is so important – people haven’t given up; it’s only some of the church that is closing down, not the community.”

Why is there still a need for worship at the heart of the community? Worship begins with a shift in perspective. It’s about realising how small we are, and how big and involved in all of life God is. Worship in its various forms gives a chance to stop, recall and reflect, to find the transcendent among the ordinary, to keep alive the rumour of God in everyday life.

Small churches in rural villages often find it hard to maintain vibrant worship. There is a need to look carefully at what local gifts each community has. Each church should take time to discover the gifts it has within it. Pett Methodist Church – which has 18 members – has found new vitality. Four members of the church have been called to lead worship as worship leaders. Young parents have offered to lead all-age celebrations. The church enjoys devising its own worship in its own context and, unlike some others, asks for ‘local arrangement’ services to be given to them. It also works closely with the Anglican church in the village sharing worship at festival times.



How seriously do you take festivals? They are a wonderful opportunity to invite people to join you, to tell the story of God, and if you work ecumenically, join together for them!

Adventure and creativity

Some rural churches have been adventurous in offering relevant worship and using resources well in order to make disciples. Here are four examples that could inspire you in your local situation.

- Messy Churches are growing in rural settings. Ninfield Methodist Church in East Sussex has run Messy Church since April 2014. At their first session they had four children and their parents or grandparents. Since then Messy Church has grown and they often have between 20 and 40 people monthly. The growth has come through



contact with the local primary school by holding its sessions after school, and by involving the whole church family in its running. There is some excellent pastoral care for adults coming along and now parents and grandparents help to run the sessions too. Messy Church congregations are vibrant, different and fun.

- Some rural churches are going out to new places with worship. Ryhall Academy Praise, or RAP as it is known, is a new venture in Lincolnshire. The Methodist chapel wanted to move their poorly attended Sunday morning service to the afternoon. Strong links had been formed with the local primary school where the headteacher was enthusiastic and supportive. The chapel members therefore decided their worship meeting should be in the school hall at 2.00pm on the first Sunday in the month. The chapel held a Carol Service for staff, governors, parents, carers and children to promote the first RAP. Approximately 50 adults and children came to the first time of praise and worship. It was very important to the team to serve the best refreshments so there was proper and decaffeinated coffee, good quality tea and homemade cakes and biscuits. A party atmosphere was created with balloons on the tables (which were eagerly taken away afterwards), craft activities, times of quiet prayer, singing and a fun-filled DVD. All of this was centred on a Bible story and a challenge to take into the week ahead.

- What if your building is failing? Look for a partner! St Helens Methodist Church in Ore village near Hastings voted to leave their building as soon as possible. They moved into the local community centre, for a small charge per session. They are now meeting at the heart of their community and sharing a space with other groups. They are sure more will join them as they are now more visible. If you are struggling with keeping a building open, where else might you meet to enable you to be that effective discipling presence?
- There are churches that have just taken risks. In Cumbria, there is the Cottage Wood Centre near Penrith. The church meets fortnightly and was down to just four members. They needed a new vision. They determined that if the building could be developed it would be a much better space for worship and could be also used by the surrounding communities who had no village hall. There was a lot of fundraising undertaken and support from the Penrith Methodist Circuit. The rest is history and the church meets weekly at 5.00pm (some people said the time would not work). They have café-style worship and around 20 people attend regularly. A Bible study and prayer meeting is held fortnightly after the Sunday service. They have an afternoon tea once a month and can make up to 50 teas. Some teas are taken out to people in the wider community who might be ill or lonely. There is a toddler group running and a film night for young people. They have regular



groups using the centre and it is a good adaptable space. Worship is at the heart of all that is done.

If your church is in a tourist area, go for a strong welcome to visitors. Cottage Wood Centre greets people with coffee, but also think about good advertisement through websites, posters, or a simple A-frame pavement sign outside the church. People need to know you are there.

Is it possible when in the countryside to worship on your own and be reminded of God because a church building is open? On the Shetland Islands is Culswick Methodist Chapel, probably the smallest and most remote chapel in the Methodist Church. Very isolated, it is in a field which you get to up a stone track. The church is open most of the time and the offering money from a previous Sunday can sometimes be found left in the plate on the communion table. Sitting in the quietness of a very remote place for a while and feeling its peace can be greatly enriching.

"Choosing to worship in my local village church is a real sacrifice for me and my family. I don't often enjoy it and travelling somewhere else would, without doubt, be much more fulfilling and supportive."

Perhaps an open church provides an opportunity for peace and a signpost to the presence of God. Perhaps there is an opportunity in the wonder

of a rural setting to provide sacred space for people passing by. How often do you open your church for people to use in this way? Some churches could be more intentional about having their buildings open for this type of spontaneous worship. They could advertise that they are open, offer things like prayer stations, creative spaces and/or activities that help people engage in worship alone at a time that suits.



From God's word

Read Matthew 18:18-20.

Jesus seems to be saying here that numbers at worship do not matter, or at the very least that small numbers can be beautiful and effective. If this is so, how does your church celebrate being small? Are there advantages in being small, intimate and well connected to rural and village life?

"If 'church' is what happens when people encounter the risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other, there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style, so long as we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart of every expression of Christian life in common."

(Rowan Williams, quoted Cray 2009:v)

- What do you celebrate about your church?
- Why would people want to join you for worship?
- How do you make Jesus a reality in the midst of the people and place you live in?



Exercise:

Location, location, location

The *Location, Location, Location* television programme endeavours to find prospective buyers the right property, in the right location, at the right price. Maybe we could think about developing worship, as part of being an effective discipling presence, in the same way?

So, for example, spend some time praying and asking God:

- What is the right style, content and time for worship in your community?
- Where is the best location, space or place to come together and worship?
- What price (in terms of purchase, rent, maintenance, buying technology and/or being creative) are you willing to pay – or have faith for – as you create space for worship?

Invite others in your context to do the same and compare what your conclusions are.

Why not?

Have a meeting with other local churches to agree patterns of worship that offer different

styles of worship which appeal to a variety of people groups and cultures.

Establish an ecumenical list of all the festival church services in your area. This list might be published in languages such as Polish, Romanian or Lithuanian so it can be accessed by people from other countries who might be working in a rural context.

Take advantage of the traditional rhythms of rural life and put on special events during times like Easter, Christmas, ploughing, sowing, reaping and lambing. Have the church open during the day so people can visit when they like and offer them simple worship activities in which they can engage.

Further reading and resources

<http://germinate.net/church-life/>
www.bigministries.co.uk - All-in Thing

J Bell, J Hopkinson and T Willmott (eds), *Re-Shaping Rural Ministry* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2009)

P Lack, *All Mud and Matins? Understanding Rural Worship* (Cambridge, Grove Books, 2008)

J Lovatt et al, *Seasonal Worship from the Countryside* (London, SPCK, 2003)



Chapter 5: Buildings as Tools for Mission

Seeing the church building as a tool for mission

Sacred space?

In small rural communities church buildings can be very visible and sometimes they may be the only community space left. They can also arouse strong feelings of 'ownership' within members of the wider community even if they don't attend worship regularly. While it is perfectly possible to be an effective discipling presence without a church building, many rural churches still do have their own premises. What do our buildings say about us? Do they speak of God, are they welcoming, are they open all the time or just for worship? Our church buildings can be an important part of our mission in different ways.

Many of us have special places in our lives: perhaps it's somewhere we love to visit on holiday, or a place where something special happened to us. For many of us the church building in which we worship may be a special place that helps develop our faith. If the church building helps you to encounter God, then maybe it could do the same for someone else. Perhaps people might call in just to look around, or as part of another activity such as a coffee morning.

These are the people that Paul Bond, in his book, *Open for You* (2006) calls the "Monday to Saturday congregation". If we are only open on Sundays there is a whole group of people that we could reach, but probably never will.



Exercise: Your special place

Spend a few minutes thinking about 'your special place'.

- Do you have one?
- Where is it and why is it special?
- If you attend a church building, think about it and how it makes you feel.

- What is good about it? And what is less appealing?
- What could be done to make it more attractive?



From God's word

The Bible is full of encounters with God, many of which happen to people in particular places. The place itself may not have been special, but became so to the person involved because they met with God there and that meeting was transformational.

Read Genesis 28:10-17, an account of Jacob at Bethel.

- What surprises you about this encounter that Jacob has with God?
- What is the effect on Jacob?

Here are some other stories of encounter:

- Moses and the burning bush – Exodus 3:1-6
- Elijah on Mount Horab – 1 Kings 19:8-13
- Jesus' Baptism – Mark 1:9-11
- Paul on the road to Damascus – Acts 9:1-9

Read some or all of these passages.

- What happened in the places described?
- What was the effect on the key person in the story?

Think of other significant places in the Bible and see what events and experiences resonate with you. Some places may already be special but take on a new significance because of what happens there.

"This [church building] is a place of peace at a time of sadness. A beautiful place to visit."

Encountering God

While we know that we can encounter God everywhere, for some, church buildings and places of pilgrimage are important in both coming to faith and sustaining faith. Consider this comment from someone who had been asked why they had begun to come to church: 'I was walking around x cathedral and God zapped me'. Their visit to a 'sacred building' had a profound effect. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by this since:

"Our buildings can be positively seen as invitations to engage with the sacred; our created physicality makes it natural that we should respond to church buildings as one legitimate means of approaching the sacred."

(Walter 2011:16)

If we take this idea seriously it can change how we think about our buildings. In some Methodist and URC, traditions we have not always seen our buildings in this way. There are various reasons for this. However, if we believe that in the incarnation "God comes to us in our humanity" (J Sheehy, in North and North 2007:16), then that humanity with its connection to places is important. Yes, God is everywhere and can be experienced anywhere. God, however, deals with us as physical human beings in particular places at particular times. Many people, as they give testimony to a call by God, will remember the place at which that occurred. If you look at the passage in Acts mentioned previously (Acts 9:1-9) you will see how this happened with Paul. Such places matter because of what has happened there – a theme we shall return to shortly.

Perhaps another issue we have with our buildings is that they don't seem 'historical' in the traditional sense. This, of course, is not the case. Some URC churches may date back to the earliest congregational churches formed at the time of the Reformation. Similarly, some Methodist churches were built right at the beginning of Wesley's ministry and might serve as places to go in the UK on pilgrimage. For example, one Methodist region is planning a pilgrimage where young adults will visit important places in the life of John Wesley, such as Epworth and Oxford.

Special places

Rural church buildings are also made 'special' by what takes place in them. People may gather in churches week by week to worship God, to pray and celebrate the sacraments. On these occasions people will hopefully encounter, and be encountered by, God. In many rural communities the church building will hold strong family and community memories as places where the community has gathered together for Baptisms, weddings and funerals across the generations. Taking these factors together should we be surprised that our church buildings can feel special?

These encounters with God – both ours and those of people who have worshipped in the building before us – can be, "built into the story of the place for the Christian community as well as the individual; and this is how places become designated as holy" (Inge 2003:90).

As special places, our church buildings can tell the story of faith in different ways. The way they are arranged, for example – pulpit or lectern, font and communion table – can say something. The history, who built it, what was happening in the community at the time, can all be other ways to tell the story. For example many small farming communities have 'their chapel'. What

was it about the faith of these often remote communities that inspired them to work and save for a building in which to worship God? Their story could inspire others, but in order to utilise this potential, our buildings need to be open and accessible.



Exercise: Inside and out

If you use a specific building for your worship, take some time to think about it. Visit the building and then answer the following:

- How welcoming is your building? Walk around your building inside and out and look to see what you might need to do to make it a more welcoming place. Invite someone from outside the church community to join you; they will bring a different perspective.
- Have you considered using a 'time lock' on the main church door? This can make opening the church building easier.
- How can you use items in the worship area to talk about faith?
- What do you know about the history of your church? Who built it and why? How might their story be used as a way to tell visitors about the Christian faith?

Multifunctional, public spaces

Seeing our buildings as sacred space shouldn't stop us using them for activities other than worship. From earliest times church buildings have been multifunctional. For example, medieval churches often hosted markets.

So far we have talked about using our buildings to show our love of God, but how can we use them to show our love of neighbour? In many rural communities the church building may be one of the few public spaces. What activity could you begin that would show 'love of neighbour' to your community?

It doesn't need to be anything complex.

Something as simple as a place to meet regularly over some good quality refreshments could be the beginning of a conversation to find out what people would value from the church. Perhaps there are outside agencies such as the local doctors' surgery who might like to use your building. Many statutory authorities struggle to find ways to deliver rural services locally and might value using your building. For example in a community that is isolated geographically there is a need to provide spaces for people so they are not isolated and lonely. In Walls (a settlement on the south side of the West Mainland, Shetland Islands) the church has been running a café every Friday for the past 11 years where delicious home-made soups and cakes are served as the café buzzes with conversation in what is a real community meeting place. One of the community nurses might look in to catch up with locals and tables fill up as the pre-school finishes. Prices are kept low so that people can afford to be regulars. One of the church members explained that this was never about making money, but giving people a place to meet and talk. The café makes a small profit which supports a project run by the Methodist charity, All We Can. This makes a real difference to the community.

"If we do end up closing rural centres of worship, it is vital we put in place other things and people to care for people spiritually."

There are many other examples around the country of church buildings hosting all kinds of community resources including shops and Post Offices. The URC building in Broad Chalke has become a real community hub following the closure of the village shop. Bringing together the URC and the Anglican churches, as well as setting up a separate legal body to secure funding and run the enterprise, took a long time (<http://germinate.net/resources/cw64-from->

urc-to-community-hub/). Now, it is a flourishing hub for that community hosting not only a shop but many other things besides. The Methodist church at Buckland Brewer in Devon also hosts a community shop which began because the village shop closed and the church members were keen to find ways of serving the community (<http://germinate.net/resources/cw64-buckland-brewer>).

Both of these projects are large undertakings, but don't let that put you off; every church has to start somewhere.

Closing a building

It may be that after careful thought and prayer you come to the conclusion your building is no longer viable. A formal discussion with those responsible for Church governance and property matters will reveal what might be possible in your building. Be as creative as is possible.

Closing the building needn't be the end of a worshipping presence. As we have already considered in previous chapters, there might be another building you can use for worship. As noted, this might be another church building, but equally it might be the village hall or some other community space. Can you continue to meet for worship and prayer in someone's house during the week? You may find that other Christians in the community who worship elsewhere on a Sunday would be happy to join a midweek gathering. There are many ways of maintaining a worshipping prayerful presence in your community without a building; be creative.

"When I think about rural ministry, I often think that if I wanted to build the kingdom of God, I probably wouldn't really want to start from where I am and in this place."

Why not?

Open your building all the week from say, dawn until dusk.

Speak to your Parish/District Council or other local organisations to see if your building can be of use to them.

Create a prayer space within your building. This could focus on the community; the world; prayers for help and/or healing; hopes and dreams; things to be thankful for; things we are sorry about.

Further reading and resources:

Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre. <http://germinate.net/church-life/rural-church-buildings>

Equipping for Rural Mission (Coventry, The Arthur Rank Centre, 2017), available from <http://germinate.net/mission/equipping-for-rural-mission>

P Bond, *Open for You* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2006)

S Friswell, *Pilgrimage* (West Kirkby, Shoreline Conversations, 2015)

J Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place (Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology)* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003)

P North and J North, *Sacred Space: House of God, Gate of Heaven* (London, Continuum, 2007)

N Walter, *The Gate of Heaven* (Cambridge, Grove Books, 2011)



Chapter 6: Effectively Engaging Rural Communities

Sharing the 'good news' story in a new way, in order to make new disciples

God's good news

Evangelism comes from the Greek word *evangelion* and means announcing and offering the good news of Jesus to others by words and witness. However, rather than filling people with a sense of receiving 'good news', the word 'evangelist' can make some people fearful. Maybe the word is associated with famous preachers such as Billy Graham and others who attracted thousands of people keen to hear the good news of Jesus, so we dismiss any suggestion that we have such a calling. Or maybe the image of the evangelist is of someone walking the city streets carrying banners urging all to 'repent and be saved' and we feel that this too is something we'd be unable to do.

However, there are many effective ways of sharing God's love which are far less daunting than preaching to thousands or pacing the streets with banners. In this chapter we offer ways we might feel we can respond positively to Scripture and the words of Jesus himself. After all, if we understand that God is already at work in the world (the *missio Dei*), all we are called to do is join in the work God has already started.

Unique opportunities

The countryside has unique opportunities for evangelism despite there being some difficulties. For example, it offers an unsurpassed connection with God's creation through the cycle of the seasons. Many of the Gospel stories, especially the parables, take place in a rural setting. This can make it easier for countryside dwellers to relate to them.

Of course those who have been fortunate enough to have been born and bred in the

countryside will be aware, as noted previously, that the population in rural areas is changing dramatically. This has a bearing on our outreach and must be taken into consideration. For example, many elderly folk are left isolated as their children seek work in the towns and cities rather than taking up traditional roles in farming.



From God's word

Consider the "the true vine" teaching in John 15:1-17 where Jesus urges us to "abide" in him.

- How can we "abide" in Jesus in the countryside in order to bear "much fruit"?
- What branches have been, or are being, 'broken off' which affect the life and finances of rural churches?
- What branches need to be pruned in order to bear more fruit?

Making the most

"It's taken me ten years, but I'm now part of the village community! I am trusted, accepted and share in the village story."

In many places there are infrequent rural bus services and the elderly, in particular, can find keeping in touch with friends difficult especially when they no longer drive a car. Often the church or chapel is the only public building remaining in the village after Post Offices, shops and other amenities leave. Thus, provision of community space in the church can become a lifeline to many.

Although some may simply want a social place to meet, chat and share a cup of tea with friends,

few will object to singing carols at Christmas time, or attending a simple Harvest Festival or Easter celebration. In fact, the Christian festivals provide a wonderful opportunity to form links between community and church life. A community meeting place also offers opportunity to invite those it welcomes onto the premises for other church events.

Linthwaite Methodist Church gave everybody in the congregation two invitations to the church Harvest Festival; one was to keep for themselves and the other was to give personally to a friend, neighbour or relative. If it was easier for them, they were allowed to post their second invitation through a neighbour's door. That particular year the congregation at the Harvest Festival doubled. It was a simple idea, but one which enabled folk in the rural community to hear the good news of the gospel. Another opportunity for evangelistic outreach can be to leave the church or chapel building and join in the increasingly popular celebration of festivals in public houses. Many of these have little or no Christian input yet provide a wonderful opportunity to connect with community.

Folk origins; faith possibilities

Not only do rural congregations have the opportunity of celebrating Christian festivals in a meaningful way, such as holding a nativity in a barn, a donkey procession on Palm Sunday and perhaps illustrating parables with other animals and images, but many rural communities hold traditional secular festivals which it is possible to link to.

On the sheep farming hills of West Yorkshire there is a Moonraker Festival where lanterns are paraded around the village. The little chapel there decided to link with that particular festival by making a huge lantern promoting Jesus the "Light of the World". In another village – which celebrated a Cuckoo Festival and the

approach of spring – the chapel was opened and celebrated the joy of creation, with crafts for the children, refreshments and a special service of praise. When the village celebrated a Jazz Festival, the church too opened its doors for Gospel Jazz, calling the service 'It's Raining Jazz Hallelujah'. On that occasion not only was the little chapel packed to capacity, but the service was relayed out into the hall and into the street in order to accommodate the congregation.

In South Yorkshire, one rural village has a Dragon Festival. Again, it's easy to link dragons with St George in order to spread the good news of Jesus. Perhaps this is exactly what the first century Christians did when they took pagan images and christianised them.



Exercise: Hearing and seeing

Jesus told parables which included rural community life so that people could relate the reality of their lives to the message of the kingdom. One such parable he told was the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23).

- How can the Church in the countryside have "ears to hear" and "eyes to see" the opportunities for evangelism?
- What new links with the community could be made?

Linking in to God's good ideas

It's so easy to base our outreach on our own 'good idea' yet Jesus, in his ministry, simply listened and then met the needs of the people whoever they were. When working in a rural market town one member of a local congregation noticed a group of young mums standing out in the rain after dropping off their children at school. She asked if they'd like to come into church and she'd put the kettle on? There answer was 'if you put us some toast on we'll

definitely come' and so it was that the Tea and Toast project was formed. They only ever served tea and toast but as numbers grew others asked if they could link with the group. Sure Start provided a toy library once a month; the Community Police offered a surgery at the church; a walking group were keen to end their walk with tea and toast; and when the local rural bus service pick up point was placed outside our building, the elderly folk from the villages enjoyed tea and toast while they waited.

The congregation also became increasingly aware of the problems faced by the local community: the isolation of both young and old; the lack of social housing; and the struggles of young families having to move frequently through private renting arrangements. They tried to care and respond in many ways and, as good relationships were formed and as a result of that care, the number of Baptisms rose sharply. This resulted in them forming a regular informal all-age worship service with lively music and many being welcomed into the life of the church. They nurtured some through the *Start!* course, and others through *Alpha*. While others chose to stay 'on the fringe' they would often join in church lunches with a short time of worship before the lunch at festival times, where they would hear the good news of the gospel.

In chapter 4, we have already heard about how Messy Church can be very successful in rural settings, but we can make a link and use a similar format for older folk who may like to meet and 'knit and natter' or do other activities.



Exercise: Food for thought

On many occasions Jesus provided food for the journey, to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the people. Jesus met with, and probably shared lunch with, friends Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), fed the 5,000

(Matthew 14:13-21) and shared a last supper with friends (Luke 22:14-20).

- How important is 'food ministry' to discipleship and evangelism?
- What 'food ministry' could you offer in your context?

Why not?

Have a 'Welcome Pack' for people new to a village. They could be given some flowers or chocolates as a house-warming gift; and perhaps a church magazine and/or letter of welcome from the church.

Undertake a community audit asking local people what they think/want/need from the church. The Germinate resource, *Equipping for Mission*, offers some pointers about how to do this (<http://germinate.net/mission/equipping-for-rural-mission>).

Run the *Journey To Faith* training course. It is specifically designed for rural contexts and can be downloaded from <http://germinate.net/mission/journey-to-faith>.

Further reading and resources

B Osborne, *Rural Evangelism in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, Grove Books, 2006)



Chapter 7: Rural Faith Journeys and Discipleship

Growing in faith and following Jesus in a contemporary rural context

“What would appear to be important is that the Church, whatever its form of meeting or of worship, and however frequently people attend formal worship, is a place in which people are enabled to see the world differently, to be inspired to live otherwise. It is to be a place (in the very broadest sense) in which a journey as disciples of Jesus Christ is undertaken. If it is not achieving that, then staying at home and having a Sunday lie-in is indeed probably time well spent.”

(Ireland and Booker 2015:13)

Lifelong discipleship

The Gospels outline in story and teaching what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We see modelled in them a discipleship that was a lifelong commitment to learning, imitation, practice and reflection, and to being held to account for one's actions. We might ask ourselves how our churches allow this same journey of lifelong commitment to be developed among their members.

The Church has always laid great importance on its Sunday worship and the value of its teaching, and the minister may well have held its members morally accountable for their actions in the community. Today the shape and structure of Church and ministry has changed, especially in our rural communities. There is a growing need to explore new ways of discipleship in which people can be encouraged on their journey of faith.



Exercise:

Ever-increasing circles

For this you will need some large sheets of paper (flipchart paper is a good size).

Spend some time identifying all the opportunities for growing in faith that your church offers during a normal month.

Once this is done, take a sheet of paper and draw on it three large concentric circles, ensuring the centre circle is large enough to write things in it. These circles represent your church. Write on the paper all of the opportunities you have identified placing them on the circles according to the nature of the activity:

- If an activity caters for those with no faith, add it to the outer circle
- If an activity caters for those who are new to the faith, then add it to the next circle
- If an activity is only for those with a developed faith, then add it to the centre circle.

Discussion:

- Is there a particular group of people who are not catered for by the activity of the church?
- Are there any activities that were hard to place, because they cater for those on different stages of their faith journeys?
- How do the activities link with one another?
- Is there a clear pattern of moving people on from the outer edges to the inner circles?

“When a local farmer died suddenly, his wife didn’t know how she was going to cope – especially milking the cows. When she woke at six the morning after his death, there were seven local farmers already hard at work doing the milking.”

A model of discipleship

A general model of discipleship (adapted from Moore, 2013) might be that of seeing the faith journey as a cycle. The entry point to this cycle is identified as a point of **Blessing**. This is an activity of the church that simply reaches out to people in order to bless them. After time, a person who has been blessed through an activity may find they are regularly attending such activities and start to develop a sense of **Belonging**. As that person starts to feel a sense of belonging to a group, the ethos of that group, the behaviour and values of others attending the group, and the teaching that is received as part of that group, all start to have an impact on that person. As they see this teaching being worked out within the group they may start to find themselves **Believing** in those values and teaching. As that person comes to believe, and adapt their behaviour and lifestyle in line with those beliefs, they find themselves **Becoming** a representative member of that group. This in turn leads them to find ways to extend a **Blessing** to others and to encourage new members.

This is a very simple approach of how discipleship is practised within churches. Although it is not a comprehensive model, it allows churches to consider its activities in light of these four stages of blessing, belonging, believing and becoming, and to be aware of the continuing need to move people on in their discipleship. However, the practice of

discipleship cannot be conformed to a simple model or pattern.



Exercise: Self-assessment

- When and how did you become a Christian?
- What was it that first got you involved in Church?
- Where are you now on the journey and cycle of blessing, belonging, believing and becoming?
- How might this model work in your rural discipleship setting?

A Gospel model

In the Gospels there are descriptions of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

The disciples were at times taught alongside great numbers of people (Matthew 5). At other times these teachings were explained to a select few (Luke 8:9-10), still other times the disciples are sent out to put into practice what they had learned (Luke 10:1) and then gathered to reflect upon their experience (Luke 10:17-24).

The cycle of learning/teaching, action and reflection still remains a useful model.



From God’s word

Read Luke 10:1-24.

The disciples are sent out in pairs to what would have been rural communities. They are given comprehensive instructions about what they are to take, what to expect and what to say. When they return, the disciples feedback to Jesus their experiences and are given further encouragement.

Your own church will probably be effective in delivering teaching and instruction through its preaching. But if the gospel model of discipleship (see above) is followed there will also need to be opportunity to give those being disciplined the chance to apply this teaching in a practical way, allowing opportunity for feedback and to offer further encouragement and guidance.

- In your own church community identify the ways in which people put their faith into action.
- How are members of your church/community encouraged to share problems they have encountered in their own faith journeys?

But surely it's the minister's job?

The nature of what ordained ministers are expected to do is changing across many denominations. In rural areas these changes may become more visible as clergy themselves become less visible. Ministers and priests in rural communities will frequently have between three and nine churches in their care. Groupings of 12 churches or more are becoming increasingly common. This results in many ordained clergy being too remote from a particular community to sustain the close networks of relationships as they once did. It is now probable that the lay church members, rather than the ordained minister, are the ones who are best placed to maintain the one-to-one relationships that are vitally important in encouraging new disciples and in discipling others further in their journeys of faith. As noted in chapter 2, we all need to be involved and say 'yes'.

A Methodist circuit on the Norfolk and Suffolk border appointed a lay worker, Jane, for twenty hours each week, to work in three of the outlying churches in the circuit. When Jane arrived, the Methodist church in East Harling met for worship once a month and the average congregation was

between six and eight people. The hall behind the chapel was (and is still) used by a small Anglican youth club, Brownies and Guides, and a flower class. After a lot of prayer, Jane joined the local ambling group, and went along to the Anglican Soul Café and from there was invited to a Bible study in the village. People from the Bible study came along to support Methodist services, a lady joined from the amblers, posters were put around the village advertising the services. Jane suggested having two services a month, and having tea and coffee after every service which would then enable the congregation to get to know each other better. Gradually, attendance at the services has grown and now between 15-25 people attend.

"I live in a rural area and love being salt and light through words of encouragement to people that I bump into whether that's through mum and tots groups or just when out walking. I don't need a dog collar to provide a pastoral listening ear to someone or to prayer walk around my community. People in villages seem a lot more open to stop and chat and share stuff than when I lived in the city."

Jane became more involved in Soul Café and suggested these evenings should be included on the plan and Methodist folk encouraged to go. A Songs of Praise was started and is held whenever there is a fifth Sunday in a month. There is a Craft Café morning twice a month, where anyone can come with whatever craft they do and enjoy coffee/tea and cake! There is no organised Christian input in this, although conversations naturally go that way on occasions.

Jane joined the flower class, and from that the church has held two flower festivals, involving the Brownies and the youth group. Each year a

Light Party is held on Halloween. The room is decorated and the church gives away hot dogs and drinks. (There is a donation pot.) There are lots of activities/games and crafts to do. Each child is given a United Christian Broadcasters Bag of Hope. Trick or treat families are invited in to have some fun in church. And around 200 people attend the event!

Understanding the rural world

It is not uncommon in rural communities to find families that have attended the same church over a number of generations. In these situations a sense of ‘ownership’ may develop that is resistant to newcomers, especially those that have more enthusiasm than the current membership! There can also develop among the church members in these less transient communities a feeling of having arrived spiritually. In such environments those longstanding church members may either seem too ‘holy’ for their faith ever to be attainable or too ‘hollow’ so that such faith seems not worth attaining anyway. It is in a community of those who recognise they are disciples themselves, and are being nurtured and challenged in their own journey of faith, that there will be the

greatest desire to reach out into the community. Mark Ireland and Mike Booker (2015) explore this in their book *Making New Disciples* and suggest that “growing people grow other people”.

“People live in rural areas, but they don’t live a rural lifestyle – they are just commuters living in the village.”

In the URC, elders are locally ordained leaders who work alongside the minister. The elders are responsible for working alongside the minister in ensuring worship, pastoral care and the management of the buildings and finance. There is a need to recognise local leadership more fully in our churches, and this model of eldership has been somewhat undervalued lately but will need to be appreciated more in the future. John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC says “[Elders] are the portholes of the Church. They are interface people, knowing how the cogs of Christian faithfulness can engage with the movement and strain in the wider community. We say to them, in effect, ‘We have appointed you because you understand the world and can help us to witness in it.’”





Exercise: Growing people

- What are the obstacles to making new disciples in your rural church community?
- How are current church members encouraged and challenged in their faith?
- How can you encourage this idea of “growing people grow other people” within your own setting?

Disciple-making disciples

The book of Acts gives us a glimpse of how those first disciples went about making new disciples, and it was very much a ‘come and see’ community. Don Everts and Doug Shaupp explore this revolutionary community idea and say:

“These people, like Jesus, opened their lives and hearts. They gave the grace of hospitality. Trust was built as their lives reflected a love and power that went beyond human reason. They were a people of great hospitality, generosity and sacrificial service. And they invited others into this life of theirs.” (2008:46)

This model of discipleship is one of disciples making disciples: a community of learners living lives of integrity and authenticity. If the Church were to be such a community it surely would have no problem in attracting new disciples.

When we see the discipling of others in this way it does not involve grand events or outreach programmes that are hard to sustain in our small rural communities. Rather, it is founded on a simple desire to share the journey with others. In this there is a place for lay and ordained, for groups and individuals, and for all to be involved in encouraging and teaching. What is needed is an intention of all those involved to fulfil their commission and to be a kingdom-focused community of disciple-making disciples.

Why not?

Do something that is generous or encourages people. For example, host a free afternoon tea for the village, have a film afternoon/evening, run a stall at the village fete that gives something away (as opposed to trying to fundraise), host a ‘dementia awareness’ evening/talk.

Set up a church Facebook page that communicates news, but also posts snippets about discipleship: perhaps a quote about an important matter in the news; a verse of Scripture; a short parable; and/or a powerful picture - anything that might engage people and point them towards God.

Deliberately start to think in ways that prioritise and see things through the lens of lay ministry, rather than ordained ministry. For example, where and when there is a choice, ask a lay person to pray, chair a meeting, teach in a small group or discipleship gathering.

Further reading and resources

Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre
www.germinate.net/go/discipleship

D Everts and D Schaupp, *Pathway to Jesus: Crossing the Thresholds of Faith* (Leicester, InterVarsity Press, 2008)

M Ireland and M Booker, *Making New Disciples: Exploring the Paradoxes of Evangelism* (London, SPCK, 2015)

P Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (Abingdon, The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013)

Chapter 8: Connecting Children and Young People

Considering the vital role younger generations play in the rural Church



“Children are not the people of tomorrow but people of today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated as adults with tenderness and respect. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they are meant to be – the unknown person inside each of them is the hope for the future.” (Korczak 1999:4)

Rural children

All children have the same basic needs, and develop in the same way. But where they live can make a difference; it affects their experiences and their opportunities in life. To some it may seem that living in a rural area surrounded by green fields is an idyllic lifestyle for a child to grow up in, enjoying space and freedom. However, for children and young people it may mean isolation; requiring a bus journey to school, a walk up the hill to get a phone signal and friends living miles away in the next village or town. In church, if they attend, they may be

on their own or be one of only a few, frustrated because there is no one in their age group. With limited resources, children's activities may happen infrequently.

“In the countryside, you have to think about where the children live, how they are going to get things, and when? After school activities are good as the children are already in the village.”

During a training event about rural ministry with children, participants were asked to identify their top three priorities for engaging with children and families in their communities. The responses were:

- for them to know that they are important to us and that we value them
- to let each child know that God loves them personally

- to serve the local community in blessing children and families with a variety of resources and events.

So how do we let each child know that they are valued and important? Love is the most important and basic need of any child. In his book *The Growth of Love* Keith White identifies five things that are vital to children for them to grow up knowing love:

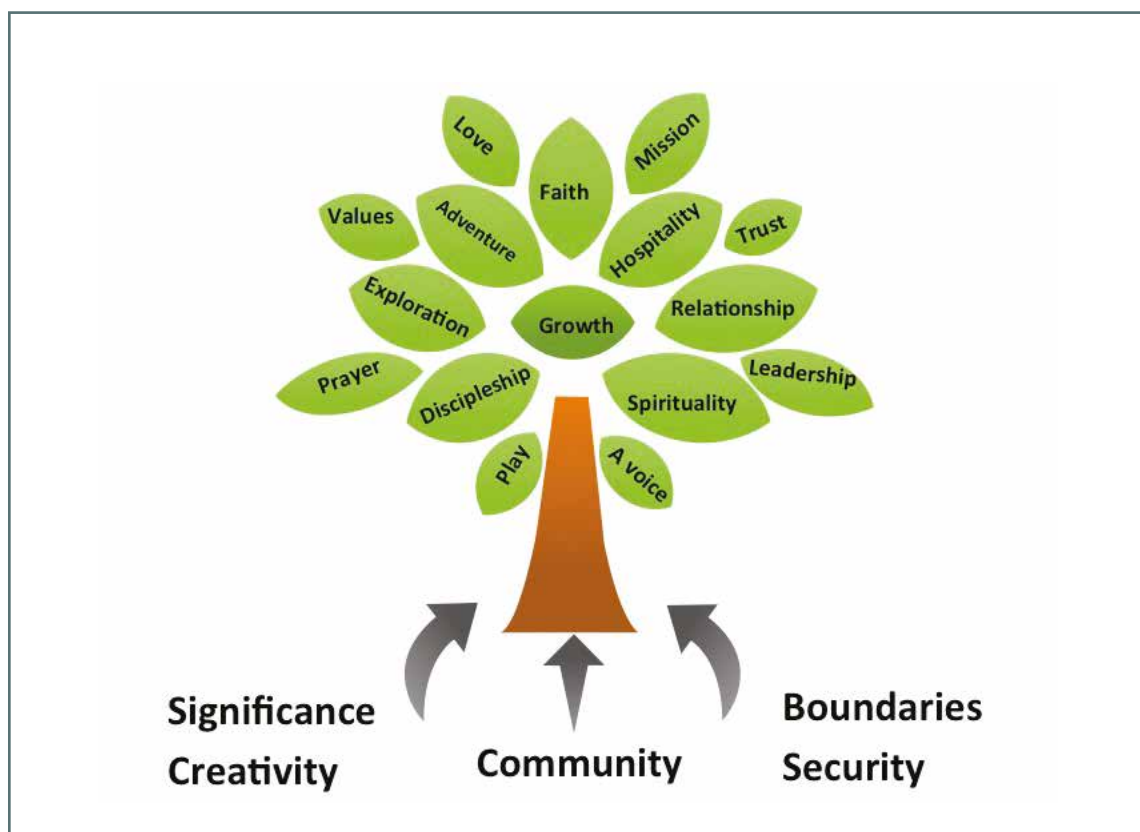
- **Significance:** each child needs to know they are valued, that they are precious as people and important for who they are.
- **Creativity:** providing opportunities for children to play, create, explore, enquire and imagine because this is how children learn and will discover for themselves.
- **Community:** children need to be able to feel part of an accepting community where they can have a sense of belonging.

- **Security:** giving a secure base for exploration, relationships and play.
- **Boundaries:** every child needs boundaries (values and rules) to feel safe and to relate to others.

Together these provide the essential roots from which discipleship with children and young people will develop. If they are the roots for the growth of love then what do they mean for those living, working and ministering in a countryside setting when thinking about children and young people becoming disciples.

Significance

"Children are people, they are individuals ... vital to their development and wellbeing is the assurance that they are infinitely precious as people."
(White 2008:123)



In toddler groups, dads and family breakfasts and youth groups, we can come alongside those attending. Asking for no response, we can show God's love in action. Those attending experience a loving welcome and a living expression of the gospel. They feel a sense of acceptance and belonging and relationships can grow. We act as facilitators of God's love, enabling children *and adults* to experience loving and caring relationships. "A gospel of cuddles smiles and softly spoken words, the seeds of which by God's grace and fuller faith will develop" (Bridger 2000:58).

This type of relationship growing happened in a village in Cambridgeshire. The closest Children's Centre was in a village two miles away and the health visitor was looking for a venue to hold the baby clinic. The church offered the church hall and a small team provided welcome and hospitality. Families found people willing to sit and chat, offer refreshments and play with the children. Invitations were given to the toddler group and other activities in the church and links were made with other parents and carers.

Creativity

"We are made in the image of God and God is the great creator, as we create and play together, we echo his playful creativity and we are renewed and repaired ourselves. Something in our spirituality is restored as our creativity chimes with his." (Moore 2006:17)

We should provide children and young people with opportunities to explore, enquire, create, imagine, build, work together and take risks relevant to their age and development. In previous chapters you will have read about Messy Church. What other opportunities are there to enable children and young people to play, explore and celebrate? Throughout the year there are many times to celebrate or come together. Rona Orme reminds us that we



should be "sharing the Church's year with the community and the community's year with the Church" (2007:14). Festivals throughout the year can be used creatively to reach out to families, such as:

- New Year
- Plough Sunday
- Mothering Sunday
- Easter
- Rogation, asking God's blessing on the fruits of the earth
- Harvest
- Christmas

Rural children want to celebrate occasions that are celebrated in non-rural areas too, such as Red Nose Day or Children in Need. All of these offer excellent opportunities for the church to join with the local community and for seeds of the gospel to be sown through action and word.

In Langwathby an ecumenical team have been using the Christmas and Easter Journey material as a way of increasing their involvement with local schools. The sessions take place in the Methodist church and children from nine local primary schools attend. The church is divided up into different areas using gazebos. The material provides a multimedia interactive presentation of the stories, and these have become eagerly-awaited annual events for local school children. Children are enabled to engage with the meaning and significance of these Christian stories in their own way through active participation, role

play, wondering and creative activity. For more information see www.christmasjourney.org and www.easterjourney.org.

Community

Children and young people need to be able to feel part of an accepting community where they can have a sense of belonging. Christ calls us to live in unity with one another. As Ronne Lamont says, “for faith to develop we need interaction with other people of the faith community, these interactions are the nutrients and water that keep the tree of faith growing and developing” (2007:25). In providing opportunities to share stories and experience awe and wonder we can see relationships strengthen and develop. The Church can make strong links with the community and local schools through special services and school assemblies.

48

Bible Society’s *Open the Book* project illustrates the type of thing possible. As Dianne Brookes, National Coordinator says:



“Churches with few children in their churches have made real steps with Open the Book to build a bridge between church and school. This can become a two-way street, and schools are now bringing the children into the church. Simple, visually effective, presentation of stories – bringing the children into the action – stirs their imaginations and speaks to their hearts. The stories, told simply without teaching or preaching, can help the children form a biblical image of God. Opportunities to strengthen this community link are many: teachers bring the children into the church to learn about the building and the Christian faith; the schools hold assemblies in the church at Christmas, Easter and End of Year. The church, through the Open the Book team, invites children and their families to come to the different festivals and team members are often fully involved in all these events.”

(<http://germinate.net/resources/open-the-book>)

Security

Every child and young person needs to feel secure. We must recognise their vulnerability and the special responsibility we have for their care. The church can provide a meeting place for children and young people through after school clubs and youth groups. Relationships can develop and strengthen and young people can be given ‘a voice’. These groups can provide opportunity for children to learn more about their own faith and make space for them to explore their own spirituality. One of the things the countryside offers is a unique context to do creative and compassionate work that helps young people have a place to which they can belong.

“I have no idea why people won’t try new and different ways of doing church in our village. It’s not like what is currently being done is working and growing the church.”

The Amelia Farm Trust (www.ameliatrust.org.uk) is a great example of how God's people can be inspired to offer a secure and stimulating environment for young people to meet in. Based in the Vale of Glamorgan, the Trust runs a farm that is a countryside sanctuary for all to enjoy. They run an alternative education programme for young people who are struggling in mainstream education perhaps because they have suffered abuse or neglect, or perhaps because they have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or autism. The Trust firmly believes that no one should be excluded from society and it is working hard to engage the community and provide appropriate support for disadvantaged and vulnerable people within a Care Farm setting and to be an educative countryside sanctuary for all to enjoy. The Trust has recently been successful in securing funding for a Methodist Church ONE Programme Participant (an OPP). This is a Church 'year on' scheme for young people aged 16-23 who want to make a difference in a variety of projects around the country. The Amelia Trust will employ a young person to build new links with the local community and encourage more volunteers at the farm in support of young people.

It is vitally important that safeguarding is put in place to ensure children and young people are kept secure. There can be a temptation in some rural communities, where everybody knows each other well, to neglect safeguarding processes and policies in the belief that 'nothing like that (ie abuse of children and/or adults) happens around here'. This type of view must be challenged and robust procedures put in place to ensure all are safe and secure.

Boundaries

Every child needs boundaries to feel safe and to relate to others. Boundaries help to provide a secure base from which to explore. Children move between different social groups and the boundaries within each all have a part to play

in providing a context where love can grow and faith develop. In an urban context children and young people can usually choose which groups to belong to. However, in a rural community the choice is not usually that extensive. There are limited places for young people to meet and gather. Sharing an interest in a hobby or sport (eg photography, dog walking, a love of the countryside, knitting) can enable young people to engage with different generations and to share and learn from each other.

A woman in Devon was passionate about sharing her love of the countryside. With encouragement from her church, and after appropriate safeguarding checks, she began a monthly group with a helper for children to study wildlife in the field. She developed good relationships with the children and gradually began to talk about the wonders of God's creation that she saw in the wildlife and countryside. This approach could be adapted to suit other hobbies and interests.

In many rural churches, there is a low level of participation by children and young people. If we want to connect with the children and young people we should consider what 'church' might look like for children and young people in a rural context. Church is not so much about the building, but about loving relationships and community. To connect with children in a rural context should we look beyond our existing models of church? It is not about dismissing what we do now entirely, but understanding that Church may happen in many different ways. Margaret Withers writes that 'there is no second-class worship or proper church ... a multifaceted outlook brings opportunities and hope for the future' (2006:33). Our mission should be to "celebrate the diversity and variety" (ibid) of God's children in ways which can be Church.



From God's word

Read Matthew 19:13-15 and Mark 10:13-16.

Jesus made a point of welcoming and including children as part of his ministry. Perhaps we should do the same, knowing that each child has an individual identity and purpose, and is special to God. The gifts and potentials that God places in each of us, making us unique and individual, are revealed and developed through nurture. We should respect the image of God that is within each child and this demands a Christlike response to nurturing them.

Diana Murray says that "Jesus challenges us not only to welcome children wholeheartedly into the church, but also to cherish the way they belong to the kingdom and to be like them" (2003:11).

- What opportunities do you have to welcome children and young people in church?
- What are the highlights of the year in your community? Is the church involved with them? If not, how might your church be?
- How can you sow the seeds of faith, nurture relationship, and cherish children in your community?

Why not?

Set aside one place on the church leadership team for someone under 25.

Always sing at least one hymn or song in worship services written by someone who is still alive, or better still, a song written this century.

Instead of sending the children and/or young people out of the service to a smaller room, send out the adults; leaving the young people in the main worship sanctuary.

Further reading and resources

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www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk
www.messychurch.org.uk
www.scriptureunion.org.uk/lightlive
www.godventure.co.uk
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Chapter 9: What if...

Asking a few 'what if' type questions in order to be a more effective discipling presence



Imagine

For a moment, imagine a village of around 1,000 people. It's in a farming area. No one is that well off, but equally, no one lives in poverty. The people of the village are a strong community. They like their church buildings. There is a Methodist church, a URC church, and a traditional Anglican church building. Each congregation is made up of a handful of dedicated and committed people; mainly of retired age. Each church wishes it had more members, like it used to have when those who attend were younger. Each church wishes more young people went along. Each wishes it had more cash to pay their heating and high maintenance bills. Each prays that they would have a minister who would live in the village and provide leadership for them. Each hopes God will do something to save them from decline and eventual closure.

In the meantime, they carry on as they always have with the same services, the same annual events, fairs and festivals, the same style of doing things and all with the same people doing them. Change is slow in the village. New ministers come and go.

Also in the village is a modern and vibrant community centre. It is clean, well-run, warm, dry and very welcoming. Lots of community activities take place there: spring, summer and Christmas events; pantomimes; luncheon clubs; a nursery; keep fit classes; a men's group; birthday parties and anniversary gatherings; fundraising concerts and shows. The car park is often full and most of the village visits the centre on a regular basis.

The strange thing is that it never occurs to the churchgoers in the village that they might not need their church buildings. They might not need to walk and struggle, each on their own. They could join forces and develop an ecumenical community. They could use the community centre for their worship and mission. They could rediscover their past – their God-initiated DNA and rich heritage – and bring it into the present: a re-imagined future full of possibility and expectation, a destiny full of hope and renewal, service and compassion. If only someone, anybody, would have the courage to make the first move and ask the 'what if...' question. If only.

"Rural congregations are small but often the rules about viability are geared to the urban and sub-urban environments where bigger congregations are found. The rural church is a Christian presence in a village or hamlet, but as a minister I have seen many close because the numbers were, according to the rules, unviable. Think small!"

Courage and change

The village described above is fictitious. However, the circumstances described will probably be familiar to many. Change can be a slow process in many rural communities and settings. However, the context does not alter the fact that the biblical narrative paints a picture of a God who is always on the move – a living God who initiates, prompts, encourages, and even demands, that we work with God in mission. This means we need to have the courage and the commitment to follow what God is doing, say ‘yes we can’ and embrace the ‘what if’ possibilities of our walk together so we become that effective discipling presence we have focused on.

At the Greenbelt Festival in 2016, the URC organised a programme of events called ‘Scrap the Church?’ asking people to reflect on what should go, and what should grow. Among the events was opportunity for people to write down what they would scrap. The largest number of the 500 responses (30%) mentioned scrapping tradition and our focus on buildings. Stephen Tomkins (editor of *Reform* magazine) says on reviewing these responses, “a large number are troubled by church buildings and our focus on them: ‘Preoccupation with buildings’, ‘Scrap the buildings and get out there with the people’. ‘Perhaps being in tents for a weekend helped that one.’”

“Sometimes it is hard to re-imagine something [rural church] without having a blank canvas – maybe we need to clear the decks a bit to create such a canvas.”

We need – to paraphrase Brian D McLaren (1998) – to understand the difference between a renewed, a restored, and a reconceived church. McLaren suggests a renewed church

is an old church that changes to serve better people and meet their needs again. A restored church is one that rediscovers some important biblical or spiritual practice (like speaking in tongues, or having Wesley-style class meetings). A reconceived or reinvented church is one that entirely changes its attitude, its style, the way it does things and embraces the idea that constant change and adaptation are the norm.

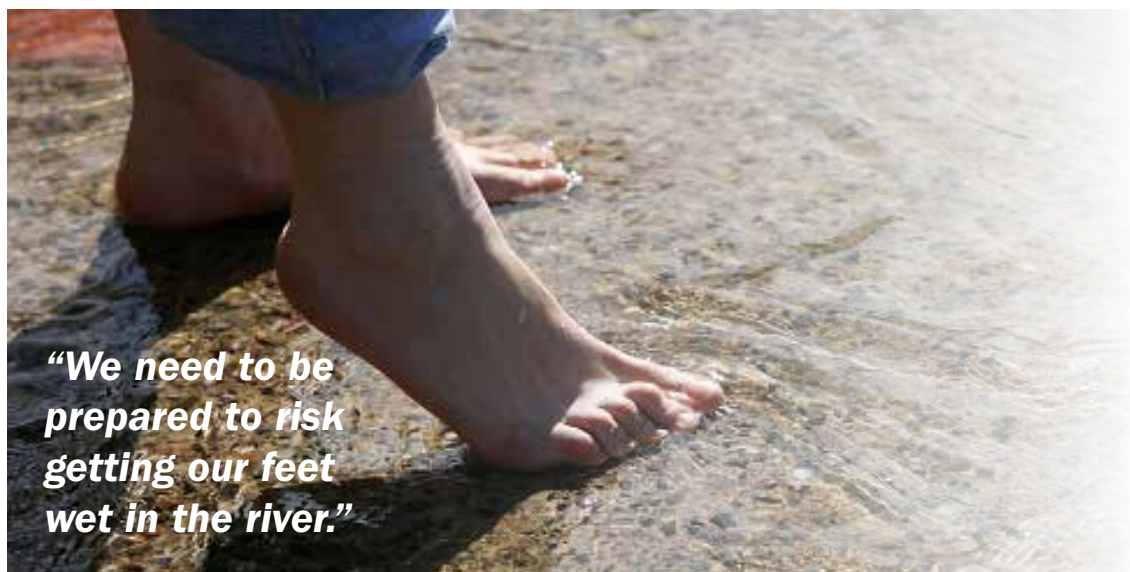


Exercise: The 3 ‘r’s

On three pieces of flip chart paper (or the back of some wallpaper) write down the headings: ‘Renewed’; ‘Restored’; and ‘Reinvented’. Draw a line down the centre of each sheet. On the left of the sheet, write the word ‘advantages’ and on the right ‘drawbacks’. Write or draw on post-it notes all the advantages and drawbacks of each approach to the ‘what if’ possibilities for rural Church. Stick the post-it notes to the relevant flip chart sheet.

- What thoughts and feelings emerge from this activity?
- Does anything grab or strike you about what has been written down?
- What will you do with these ‘findings’?

Whether we are about renewal, restoration or reinvention we need courage to act and recalibrate our mission so it is in line with God’s mission. Renewing or restoring the rural Church has merit. Those who ask the ‘what if...’ question, however, seem – more often than not – to be drawn to re-conceive or reinvent Church. If the rural Church is to be an effective discipling presence and have a faithful future, then asking ‘what if’ needs to be encouraged on an ongoing basis.



From God's word

Read Joshua 3:1-17.

We can spend a great deal of time, money and energy trying to make our present models of rural Church 'better', when what we really might be being called into, is doing things differently. Ways of thinking and being that take full account of the fact that – to paraphrase the book of Joshua – 'we haven't been this way before' (Joshua 3:4).

Sometimes, to stay with the Joshua illustration, we need to dedicate and devote ourselves to God afresh, staying pure and keeping holy. We need to break camp and follow whatever the modern equivalent of the covenant chest is. We have to appoint people to do a job. We need to journey to new places and in a way we have not done thus far. We need to be prepared to risk getting our feet wet in the river. We have to progress as far as we can using what is to hand whilst listening to God and relying on God for a miracle. In short, putting it all out there and believing ... 'what if'. This usually means doing things differently to how we have done them in the past.

- In what ways might God be calling you to go a way you haven't been before?

- Do you need to break camp; put a few things away; set off in a new direction and/or get your feet wet in the water?
- Having identified some of the things these metaphors might mean, what action do you need to take so we become a more effective discipling presence?

A story of possibility

Two years ago, the congregation of Awsworth Methodist Church made the painful decision to give up their building. They had all prayed about the decision and were unanimous that, although they could have tried hard to cling on to the building, it seemed immoral and selfish to raise the £40,000 needed to maintain it just for the benefit of 10 people. So they sold the building and decided to find accommodation that could provide them with a worship space, plus availability for Ladies Fellowship and Boys Brigade. God led them to the Youth Wing of their village hall.

Although they spent a year or so feeling bereaved at the loss of the building, they decided there was a gap in the village and the needs of older folk were not being met, especially for those who were carers and dementia partners. They decided to send out invites and do a proper afternoon tea to try and meet these needs. They had a good response, and now have around 20 to 25 folk enjoying their 'Amigo'

afternoons. Home-made cakes, tea and coffee start the first hour so there is lots of chat and sharing. Then it could be a quiz, bingo, beetle game, dominoes or at Christmas some lively singing and carols. At Easter everybody had an egg with a specially printed card with an Easter message on it. There is lots of love, laughter and fellowship shared. There are no extra people in the worship service, but they don't believe that matters. The aim of the venture was to meet and pray for their new Amigos and hopefully improve their lives.

"Last year we decided to have a Holy Week Art Festival. There were over 30 pieces of art displayed by local artists and over 100 people visited the exhibition."

The people of Awsworth dared to think 'what if'; they spent time praying and reflecting and then they saw something. If we are to journey differently so we become a more effective discipling presence, then this praying, reflecting and waiting are vital steps as we co-create missionally with God.

Missio Dei

In chapter 6 the idea of the *missio Dei* was introduced. The *missio Dei* is "the belief that it is God's mission, rather than ours, and that God's people are instruments in that mission" (Pimlott 2015:33).

The example from Awsworth and many of the other stories in this book can only be told because the people of God decided to do things differently and pursue the *missio Dei*. Doing this meant they needed to raise their awareness levels about what God was up to.

Those involved in education talk about what are known as 'threshold concepts'. These are key

ideas, core understandings, new windows or portals through which something can be seen or grasped in a way that, once it is grasped, transforms how we perceive a given subject or situation.

We might think about these ideas in terms of when someone 'gets it' or when something 'clicks into place'. For example, when learning to drive we go through a threshold concept and all of a sudden get how to find the biting point of the clutch. We cross over so successfully that, once people have learnt to drive, most drivers don't even think about what they are doing with the clutch anymore. When people started out using the internet or smartphones it might have been scary, but they crossed a threshold and now it is obvious for most. Our hope is that this is how we go about working with God. It might be tricky,



scary and a challenge to start with, but it soon becomes natural and obvious.

To end this book, a few more ‘what if...’ questions that draw together many of the thoughts already considered in ways that might make joining in with God’s mission a little more readily possible:

- What if the rural Church stopped facilitating worship services but rather became a series of communities that took discipleship and love of neighbour more seriously?
- What if the Church changed the rules about what lay people can and cannot do in order that local churches could be a more flexible and responsive effective discipling presence?
- What if local needs, rural priorities and building Christian community were resourced and considered more seriously than the outcomes of denominational directives, Church Councils, Conferences and Synods?
- What if the denominations strategically worked together more with the declared intention of having no more than one worship building in any given locality?



Exercise:

Explore, dream, discover

The American author Jackson Brown once said, “Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do

than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

Imagine you are 20 years into the future.

- Looking back, what do you wish you had done differently in the rural Church of which you are a part?
- Based upon the answers given, what can you do differently now so we don’t live with regrets in 20 year’s time?
- When will these be done?
- Who will do them?
- How?

Further reading and resources

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www.urc.org.uk/mission/rural-mission.html

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M Moynagh and R Peabody, *Refresh: A Not-So-New Guide to Being Church and Doing Life* (Oxford, Monarch, 2016)

S Murray, *Post Christendom* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2004)

“So throw off the
bowlines. Sail away
from the safe
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the trade winds
in your sails.
Explore. Dream.
Discover.”



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"Those who have written this resource speak from experience and do so with passion, conviction and wisdom. Each of the chapters encourages us, challenges us and offers some pointers about how we can better make disciples in the rural church. It will appeal to those working in a wide variety of rural contexts and I warmly recommend it to you."

The Revd Loraine Mellor,
President of the Methodist Conference 2017/2018

"Jesus was at home in the countryside. So are his churches. We are glad and grateful to be present in small towns, villages and the rural communities of our land. For anyone involved in rural church life, this book offers food for thought, confidence in God and hope for the future. It's realistic and practical. It won't impose other people's answers on your local situation. But it might enable you to build on other people's experience, and to find what helps in your own place. It's written by people who care, who know and respect rural life, and who believe that your local church has a big contribution to make in the community where you live, serve and worship."

The Revd John Proctor,
General Secretary, the United Reformed Church



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