

The challenges of rural ministry are addressed in a new report aimed at releasing the energies of clergy and lay people for mission in the countryside.

The study *Released for Mission, Growing the Rural Church*, to be debated by the General Synod next month, makes a series of recommendations including locally accessible training and development for lay people and clergy working in multi-church groups.

A review needs to be carried out urgently to examine how to simplify legal governance structures of multi-church groups, the report recommends.

Multi-church groups would also benefit from improving systems to take care of administrative tasks, financial accounting, and building and churchyard management on behalf of the whole group.

More ecumenical partnership should also be encouraged, opening up the possibility of new initiatives that might not be possible for a single denomination, the report adds.

Mission and growth are more likely to flourish in rural multi-church groups where time and space is created for this, the report notes, and where the ministry of lay people is supported.

Nearly two-thirds or 65%, of Church of England churches - 10,199 - are in rural areas and almost all work in groups.

The study, from the Rural Affairs Group of the General Synod, drew on interviews with 47 clergy and lay people from 35 rural church groupings in six dioceses in the autumn of 2010 and spring 2011. Data was also analysed from parish returns, and the 2011 Census. The research project was led by the Church of England's National Rural Officer, Canon Dr Jill Hopkinson.

James Bell, Bishop of Knaresborough, and chair of the Rural Affairs Group of the General Synod, writing in the foreword to the report, described the recommendations as "practical and achievable."

"A Christian presence in every community is more than a strap-line - it is the heart of English Anglicanism. It is the expression of our obligation, as the church for all the people of the nation, to leave no community untouched by the gospel of Jesus Christ, lived out among the people of every place," he said.

"Ministry and mission in the rural church is highly demanding of energy and imagination. Growth is being realised but much needs to be done."

Dr Hopkinson said: "*Released for Mission* highlights the enormous amount of high quality work being carried out by rural churches, including fresh expressions of Church, seekers courses, children's activities, much needed facilities for local communities and support for those who are isolated.

"The report shows that mission and growth are more likely to flourish in rural multi-church groups where time and space is enabled for it to take place and where the ministry of lay people is enabled and equipped.

"This research is a starting point, it is not a simple solution to all the problems of rural ministry. Further work urgently needs to be done to continue to identify and share existing good practice in all areas of the life of rural churches and to ensure that the recommendations made in

Released for Mission are implemented quickly."

Dr Hopkinson added that the Rural Affairs Group looks forward to working with the Arthur Rank Centre, the churches' centre for rural mission and ministry, and ecumenical partners to achieve its aims.

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