

# SHAPING STRATEGIES FOR MISSION AND GROWTH IN RURAL MULTI-CHURCH GROUPS



A SUMMARY OF KEY  
FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS  
OF RECENT RESEARCH

## SHAPING STRATEGIES FOR MISSION AND GROWTH IN RURAL MULTI-CHURCH GROUPS:

### A SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT RESEARCH.



Following the publication of *Released for Mission: growing the rural church* in February 2015, there has been a resurgence of interest in research on rural churches. This short report draws together two recent publications that have direct relevance for strategies supporting mission and growth in rural multi-church groups. The first, *Going Deeper: church attendance statistics and clergy deployment*<sup>1</sup> was published in July 2016 as part of the continued work of the Church Growth Research Programme. It provides up to date statistics on growth in multi-church groups and clergy deployment. The second, *A Case for Multiplying the Type and Number of Churches*<sup>2</sup> by George Lings of the Church Army Research Unit was published in the November 2016 edition of *Rural Theology* and argues for the diverse reproduction of churches, including those in rural areas.

## THE BODY OF CHRIST

It has been said that the local church is the hope of the world: the rural church functioning as the body of Christ, is integral to this hope. Rural congregations need to continue to develop an understanding of themselves as the body of Christ within a community, assuming responsibility for mission and growth with clergy and lay leaders.

The reality is that the rural church makes up two thirds of Church of England parishes and 40% of the worshippers,<sup>3</sup> so is a major part of the whole church. A widely heard narrative of the rural church is one of decline and failure. However, there is evidence of high quality mission through community based activities, outreach, social action and evangelism by many rural churches. Fresh expressions of church have a continuing valuable role as part of a mixed economy. It is time to tell a new story that is honest and realistic, that celebrates what is good, acknowledges that rural churches can and do grow, identifies how, and addresses the things that need to change.

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<sup>1</sup> Tweedie, Fiona, *Going Deeper: church attendance statistics and clergy deployment* (2016)  
[http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/going\\_deeper](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/going_deeper)

<sup>2</sup> Lings, George, *A Case for Multiplying the Type and Number of Churches*, *Rural Theology*, 14 (2), November 2016, 112-133  
<http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14704994.2016.1234858>

<sup>3</sup> Archbishops' Council, *Released for Mission: growing the rural church*, (2016)  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2148423/gs%20misc%201092%20-%20rural%20multi%20parish%20benefices.pdf>

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The distinctive vocation of the Church of England is to be there for everyone within the geographical parish. However, in a multi-church group it is no longer possible for a single minister to operate or try to operate a traditional approach to the cure of souls in every of community. Over many decades, rural communities have been brought together in multi-church groups in order to ensure that this ministry to the whole community can be delivered. The issue becomes all the sharper when we acknowledge that 40% of stipendiary clergy will retire in the next ten years.

In the light of the prevalence and inherent complexity of the multi-church unit, rural churches need to claim the model of the body of Christ in their worshipping life and practice. The passages of 1 Corinthians 12–13; Ephesians 3.14–4.16; Romans 12.4–13 speak of church as the body of Christ and all three speak of love as the distinctive feature of the Christian community. 'We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us' (Romans 12.6). In 1 Corinthians 12.7 Paul states that 'in each there is a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' In Ephesians 4.7, he says 'each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.' Individual churches and multi-church groups need to take time and prayer to discover and act on the communal calling to be the body of Christ in that place, welcoming everyone to take part, to discern and offer their gifts and skills. The mission of God's church in rural communities is a corporate undertaking requiring the whole congregation to be involved.<sup>4</sup>

Archbishop Justin Welby has said that 'any church that leaves things to the 'professionals' is committing missionary suicide... The responsibility of demonstrating in word and works the love of Jesus Christ, in a way that is deeply attractive is the responsibility of every single Christian. Always. Everywhere.'<sup>5</sup>

He went on to say: 'What draws people in, above all, is community. It's the fact that they belong. They discover they belong, they're part of the family of Christ, they're children of God. They are loved by others, they are accepted, they're welcomed.' That is being the body of Christ according to Paul's better way in 1 Corinthians 13.

Rural churches have many qualities and attributes but there are five essential characteristics that flow from this model of the body of Christ, that can be used to describe the place and role of the rural church in the community and that illuminate its approach to mission, evangelism and growth.

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Greenwood's recent book, *Sharing God's Blessing: How to Renew the Local Church* offers a very useful approach to enable the whole congregation to be involved.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Justin-Welby-Leaving-evangelism-to-professionals-is-missionary-suicide>

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## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST – DEVELOPED FOR THE RURAL CHURCH

**INCARNATIONAL** – being a visible and active presence within the wider community, rooted within it, with a commitment to be a sacred space available for all. Rural churches often have high levels of engagement with the community, with larger proportions of the rural population attending church regularly and on the fringes of the regular congregation.

**RELATIONAL** – stressing the importance of welcome and personal relationships; understanding and expressing love of neighbour, especially for ‘people who are not like us.’ In many rural communities natural networks of friends and family still exist which provides opportunities for pastoral care, reconciliation, social support and sharing faith.

**CONTEXTUAL** – responding to and engaged with the realities of the local community, its particularities, strengths and weaknesses. Rural churches often have charisms that are shaped by the community, which provide a basis for contextual mission and evangelism. Worship, pastoral care, outreach and evangelism need to connect with the experiences, needs and numbers of those in the community and congregation, which are likely to be different in many ways to larger congregations in towns and cities.

**PARTICIPATORY** – being the body of Christ in that place creating space for all to offer their gifts and skills. The ministry of the whole people of God is essential for the life and work of rural churches in multi-church groups. One of the roles of the ordained is to discern and release the gifts given in the body, exercising distributive authority to encourage collaboration and value all contributions to life and work of the church in those places. For rural churches this means working creatively within and between multi-church groups, in fellowship with other Christian traditions and in partnership with community organisations.

**SPIRITUAL** – being the body of Christ in a place that shows in deed and word the life-giving, life changing love of God. A group of people who are able to pray regularly for the needs of the community, for people who are not yet part of the church, for the needs of friends and family, and for themselves. A group of people able to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ through worship, transforming communities and making new disciples.

**Building on these characteristics of being the body of Christ, and recognising the strengths and weakness of rural parishes and multi-church groups, mission and growth become possible when the right conditions are created for that mission potential to be unlocked and sustained. Key contributing factors include: a culture of envisioning, enabling and equipping; the deep involvement of congregation members in the life of their community; and the experience of knowing and being known in rural communities. Discerning and releasing lay leadership contributes to ministry, mission, evangelism and ultimately growth.**

# MULTI-CHURCH GROUPS AND GROWTH

Growth is possible in rural multi-church groups where the right conditions are in place. That is what emerged clearly from the research that led to the publication of *Released for Mission: growing the rural church*.<sup>6</sup> The research shows that growth in rural churches is associated with six particular characteristics:



1. an intentional focus on mission and evangelism, beyond a focus on Sunday worship;
2. a culture of personal and corporate discipleship within congregations;
3. a committed group of lay people leading a range of activities and events, with easily accessible training and support available;
4. a redirection of time and energy, particularly but not exclusively for clergy, from administration and building maintenance to outreach, service and evangelism;
5. an approach to ordained ministry in which discerning, nurturing and equipping the ministry of lay people within the body of Christ is one of the highest-priority areas of work for the clergy, backed up by appropriate training and support;
6. co-operation and collaboration within and between different multi-church groups, and ecumenically wherever possible.

The research indicates that developing these six characteristics must be a priority for rural multi-church groups which seek to grow and for the diocesan strategies that support them.

<sup>6</sup> Archbishops' Council, *Released for Mission: growing the rural church*, (2016)  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2148423/gs%20misc%201092%20-%20rural%20multi%20parish%20benefices.pdf>

# CAN THE RURAL CHURCH GROW?

The statistics in Released for Mission and subsequent work carried out by the Church Growth Research Programme, published most recently as *Going Deeper*,<sup>7</sup> confirm that rural churches can and do grow. In fact roughly the same proportion of rural parishes as urban parishes grow. Five factors that could influence church growth or decline were measured using data from a ten year period between 2001 and 2011.

## Geographical location and size of multi-church group

The more rural<sup>8</sup> a parish is, the more likely it is to be in a multi-church group that will have more than four churches within it. 70% of urban parishes are single parishes. Growth is highest in an urban conurbation, irrespective of the size of multi-church group, but rural villages and hamlets also show very similar proportions of growth. Parishes in city and larger town centres and in rural towns show significantly greater decline than parishes in other areas. The analysis showed that the different sizes of multi-church group show no statistical difference in growth, stability or decline. The geographical location of the parish has a significant impact on growth or decline, but benefice size and structure does not.

## Population Change in the Parish

An increase in the population of a parish had a positive effect on the growth of churches. Areas with large increases in population between 2001 and 2011 had higher average standardised growth for that ten year period. Parishes that had a declining population saw a decline in congregation numbers. It is important to note that this effect was much more important for large cities and towns but was less pronounced in rural areas. An increasing population in villages had much less effect on growth over the ten year period, probably because the population change was small overall. This factor is not additionally affected by the size of multi-church group, so that overall, population increase is associated with growing congregations.

## Size of Existing Congregation

The size of the existing congregation influences growth, but this differs depending on the geographical location of the parish. In urban areas it is larger congregations (i.e. an existing congregation of 90 or more people) that are more likely to grow. In rural areas it is smaller congregations that see more growth – i.e. congregations of 30 or less. This factor is not additionally affected by the size of multi-church group.

<sup>7</sup> *Going Deeper: church attendance statistics and clergy deployment and summary document*  
[http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Amalgamating\\_parishes\\_and\\_declining\\_clergy\\_numbers\\_Final.pdf](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Amalgamating_parishes_and_declining_clergy_numbers_Final.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Defined by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs classification of rural and urban areas.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/2011-rural-urban-classification>

## Clergy Deployment

What are the effects of the deployment of clergy on growth or decline in multi-church groups? Three factors were used to explore growth or decline over a ten year period between 2001 and 2011:

- the number of clergy in the benefice in 2011, calculated using full time equivalent (FTE) posts
- the total number of clergy years available to the benefice between 2005 and 2011, in other words the amount of clergy time available
- the change in the number of clergy available to the parish in the 2005 to 2011 period.

The results for each measure show that there are differing and contrasting effects on growth and decline.



## Clergy numbers in 2011

This measure provides a snapshot of the number of clergy in each benefice at a single point in 2011, for stipendiary clergy, SSMs, and a total figure (excluding retired clergy). The results show that 62% of churches in urban conurbations and 46% of urban city / town churches had at least the equivalent of one full time stipendiary clergy person. Over 60% of all parishes do not have any SSM ministry. Over one fifth of churches in rural villages and hamlets did not have any stipendiary clergy available to them, meaning that the group was either in vacancy or received ministry only from self-supporting clergy.

When growth or decline was measured over five years (2001 – 2006) and ten years (2001 – 2011) it showed that a larger number of stipendiary, SSM and total number of clergy present in 2011 was associated with growth in the five year period 2006 to 2011 but not in the 10 year period 2001 to 2011. Currently the explanation for this difference is unclear but it may imply that the presence or absence of clergy at one particular point in time has more impact on growth in the short rather than long term.

## Clergy years per church 2005 – 2011

Clergy years per church is a measure of the number of full years of ministry available to a church over the seven-year period (2005-2011). For example, a church that had one full-time priest for the whole of the seven year period would have seven clergy years available to it. 37% of parishes in urban conurbations have had at least seven stipendiary clergy years in the seven year period, with over three-quarters of urban churches having clergy for at least half of the seven-year period. In the same period, 6% of rural hamlet parishes had no stipendiary clergy in the benefice. In rural villages, 90% of parishes have had less than the equivalent of half a clergy-person per year between 2005 and 2011.

A larger number of stipendiary clergy years available to a parish between 2005 and 2011 correlates closely with growth in a parish over 10 years (2001 – 2011), but there is no statistically significant effect on growth or decline over five years. For the total number of clergy available (stipendiary and SSM combined), the larger the number of clergy available over the seven year period, the more growth seen over the ten-year period to 2011, but there is no effect when measured over five years. This suggests that although growth is affected by the amount of clergy time available, with more time available resulting in growth, it is a factor that is important for growth in the long term rather than the short term.

## Change in Clergy Numbers 2005-2011

What is the effect of changes in the number of clergy available to a parish over the seven year period 2005 – 2011? There is a close association between change in clergy numbers and growth or decline. An increase in the number of clergy between 2005 and 2011 is associated with growth over both five and ten year periods to 2011. This applies to changes in numbers of stipendiary and SSM clergy and for the total number of clergy. This effect is less pronounced in rural villages and hamlets, where changes in stipendiary clergy numbers seem to have less effect on growth or decline than in urban areas.

In strategic terms these three measures suggest that a focus on improving clergy retention and preventing burnout by providing good quality and relevant training and support for clergy in multi-church groups are important. Additionally, this indicates that growth requires a patient long-term input, particularly by clergy. It also suggests that the particular form of recognised leadership and oversight offered by clergy is important for growth. Therefore in preparation for a vacancy attention should be paid to how local leadership will be developed and exercised.

**How should we make use of this information? Firstly, correlation is not causation, so that whilst this quantitative analysis provides useful guidance and pointers for factors that may influence church growth, other qualitative factors are important. These include: having a clear mission and purpose; being willing to change and adapt, as well as reflect on practice; involving lay people in mission and ministry; having a focus on working with children and young people; being intentional in outreach; nurturing new and existing disciples.<sup>9</sup> Secondly that growth and decline in rural multi-church groups is extremely complicated and nuanced. Whatever the geography and size, growth and decline are influenced by many factors which interact with each other, only five have been explored here. Thirdly, that multi-church groups are not immediately associated with decline (irrespective of their size) but their growth is more affected by the number of clergy, the time available to them and how they are deployed. Although the effect of the presence of or change in the numbers of clergy on growth or decline is less pronounced in rural multi-church groups than in urban areas.**

<sup>9</sup>Archbishops' Council, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (2013) <http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report>

## The need for diverse multiplication of churches

*A Case for Multiplying the Type and Number of Churches*<sup>10</sup> reanalyses current data sets for church attendance and parish population size using a method first used by David Wasdell in the 1970s. Wasdell concluded that:

- as soon as there are parishes of over 2000 people, a ceiling to congregational attendance occurs
- in parishes with a population of more than 4000 people no matter how large the population was, the average congregation was still no more than around 175
- no clergyperson could meaningfully relate to a congregation of more than 175 people. Bob Jackson more recently has this figure at around 120<sup>11</sup>
- increases of attendance over 175 were directly attributable to deploying additional full-time staff, but with a law of diminishing returns, such that the first additional full-time clergy person would add another 90, the second only another 80 etc.

Lings suggests that a vital conclusion from this analysis, particularly as the same effects can be demonstrated from current figures, is that seeking to increase clergy numbers and increasing the flexibility of clergy deployment, while good in itself, cannot be the only response to the desire for church growth. Lings goes on to explore what Wasdell called parish penetration – in other words how effective the church is in reaching the whole population of the parish. Penetration is calculated based on electoral roll, average weekly attendance and Christmas and Easter communicants, divided by parish population. It can only be an indicative factor, but it shows that the larger the population of the parish the smaller the proportion of that population the church is in touch with. Strategically this becomes a rural factor as so many rural parishes have very small populations, and rural churches often have a very high visibility in their communities.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the networks of friendships, family and other relationships are key factors in understanding how congregations relate to the wider community. It is the knowing and being known that goes with smaller populations and indeed congregations that is valuable.

Lings concurs with Wasdell that as congregations increase in size there is a negative effect on the quality of relationships, opportunities for learning and participation and the ability of people to take responsibility and use their gifts, all of which have more opportunity to flourish in smaller, rural congregations.



<sup>10</sup> Lings, George, *A Case for Multiplying the Type and Number of Churches*, *Rural Theology*, 14 (2), November 2016, 112-133  
<http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14704994.2016.1234858>

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, Bob, *Hope for the Church*, (London: CHP, 2002), p.121

<sup>12</sup> This is confirmed by: *Released for Mission: growing the rural church* (2015) and Farnell et al., *Faith in Rural Communities: contributions of social capital to community vibrancy* (2006)  
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402151656/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/research/faith-report-full.pdf>

Lings takes this analysis further, and constructs a model of a current parish church as a box formed of: the presence of a priest who is expected to do most things, the church building, the difficulty of crossing parish boundaries, the prevalence of Sunday worship as the only “proper way” of being church, suspicion of lay leadership in some places and an expectation that people will come to us.



Lings suggest that the box needs to become porous to let other approaches flourish alongside. The porous box could include: the pioneer approach, encouraging ‘lay-lay’ leadership to bubble up and develop, developing contextually appropriate fresh expressions of church, recognising the breadth of things that God calls us to in vocation and forming missional communities, to create spaces where everyone can encounter the risen Christ.

The conclusion is that growing churches is not about growing ‘bigger, brighter boxes’, but about allowing a diverse ‘reproduction’ of different types of churches. In other words: ‘the church must dare to have church children, who are related to us but not the same as their parent body.’<sup>13</sup> The Network Youth Church<sup>14</sup> in Carlisle Diocese is a good example of the sort of creativity that is needed in a rural context. Another way of putting this would be to say that in order to grow, rural churches need to become more internally diverse, with a variety of ways to be church, as shown by the diversity of fresh expressions of church and Messy Church.<sup>15</sup> They also need to focus on discipleship and community service, with both existing together and equally affirmed within one local church family. This is where there is potential for strength within a multi-church group where each church can play to its gifts and calling and smaller congregations can work with and be supported by others to reproduce. Growth is unlikely to come through trying to grow existing Sunday morning congregations (though it might), but from allowing new things to develop.

<sup>13</sup> Lings, p. 131

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.thenetworkchurch.org.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> Church Army’s research has shown that Messy Churches are often found in rural areas. Church Army’s research unit report *The Day of Small Things* showed 49% of Anglican Messy churches occurred across a variety of rural settings. George Lings, *The Day of Small Things* (Sheffield: Church Army 2016) section 7.3, p. 133.

## What can we learn from this for practice rural multi-church groups?

- Encouraging growth should not just be about strategies which aim to increase the size of existing congregations.
- Reproduction of churches could be a useful concept to develop thinking further to ensure that mission and evangelism are contextual.<sup>16</sup>
- The development of the ministries of all lay people is key.

## Implementation

The following points suggest some ways in which rural multi-church groups might respond to the findings of the two research reports.

1. The strategy and practice of every multi-church group should facilitate the mission of the whole body of Christ so that the development of the ministry of lay people is a key part of the reality for rural congregations
2. Many clergy already work collaboratively and collegially and all should be expected to. Clergy would also benefit from specific CMD to manage multi-church groups and develop an enabling and equipping style of leadership that seeks to grow and facilitate the ministry of lay people
3. The provision of high-quality specific and locally accessible training and resources for lay people, appropriate for context of rural multi-church groups, primarily to support discipleship, vocation, mission and ministry, is therefore essential.
4. To allow churches to reproduce as part of growth in rural multi-church groups means creating space for the new to grow alongside existing congregations. Church growth will increasingly mean pioneering and developing new approaches to church, including fresh expressions of church, that take place across the week, not necessarily on a Sunday morning. This is a key issue in terms of how the time and skills of clergy and lay leaders are used to best effect to create space for this to happen. The challenge for local practice in developing this dual approach is about actually freeing up time to develop the new.
5. Partnership working will be a key part of local strategy for growth and acknowledged as part of diocesan strategy. Ecumenical partnership is often most effective at the local level, working out what can be done together, drawing on and learning from each other's strengths. Partnership with other organisations, groups and networks also provide opportunities

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<sup>16</sup> George Lings has recently published a book arguing a theological case for thinking that reproducing is part of the nature of the Church. George Lings, *Reproducing Churches* (Abingdon: BRF, 2016)

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6. Working out of the church box will also positively mean much better partnership with schools, primary and secondary, whether church schools or not, with opportunities made for innovative engagement with young people. It is essential that different parts of the diocesan structure, such as the Board of Education, those with responsibility for ministry with children and young people, mission etc., work together to achieve this.
7. An appropriate mechanism, such as a Mission or Growth Action Plan or other approach that helps every benefice and every parish within every benefice develop an intentional focus on mission and evangelism, is essential. Putting these plans together for a deanery, particularly for smaller deaneries, may be helpful in identifying a wider strategy over an area, which in turn could help guide clergy deployment.
8. Clergy are an important factor for growth in rural multi-church groups. As such, clergy should not work in isolation but wherever possible, as part of an informal or formal teams of lay and ordained, across a multi-church group, deanery or other area. Praying and planning together are key not only to encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas but for mutual support and development.
9. Structures and governance functions of most multi-church groups need to be significantly simplified and the process for making these changes needs to be simpler in itself. We should not be asking clergy to manage the complexity and multiplication represented by multiple PCCs. Vacancies could be an opportune time for exploring this sort of simplification of structures.
10. All multi-church groups need effective systems for administration, finances and managing / developing the church building to enable mission and free up the time of clergy and lay people alike. Support to develop these systems locally needs to be encouraged and enabled as part of diocesan strategy.
11. Mission enabler posts, pioneer ministers, lay workers, youth workers, schools workers etc. could all have a role in the countryside alongside clergy and lay leaders. The deanery may have an obvious role here in terms of deployment and working area. The Strategic Development Fund may well have opportunities for funding projects of this sort seen as part of a contextual strategy for growth.
12. Given the deep and intricate relationship between many rural churches and their communities, any strategy for mission and growth needs to build on these existing relationships, exploring where God is already at work in the community and making use of gifts and skills in congregation and community.

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