

GENERAL SYNOD

Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Parish Benefices

A note from the Rural Affairs Group a sub-group of the Mission and Public Affairs Council

1. *Released for mission: growing the rural church (GS Misc 1092)* captures the authentic grassroots voices of lay people and clergy working in rural multi-church groups. Their voices tell a narrative of the reality of mission and ministry, the creative ideas and opportunities, the difficulties and challenges. The situation is by no means without hope, as the research has shown that mission and growth are possible where clergy and lay people work in partnership and there is time and space to develop meaningful outreach.
2. The Church of England is a parochial church committed to every community. The multi-church group (multi-parish benefice or Team) has been a response to the desire to maintain this commitment. However, not enough attention has been paid to how this construct works on the ground; how worship, pastoral care, work with children and schools, outreach and evangelism can thrive when there are multiple communities, multiple congregations, multiple buildings and therefore great complexity. We have risked stretching clergy and lay people to breaking point and beyond without reflecting on and articulating clearly how strategies, expectations and approaches should change.
3. There are no simple solutions that can be applied to all multi-church groups that will at one stroke result in all the change necessary. However, as this research has shown, there are practical and achievable recommendations that if implemented effectively can release rural clergy and lay people for mission and growth.
4. We identify five priorities that will assist rural multi-church groups to rediscover their missional purpose.
 - a. Building a culture of discipleship appropriate to the rural context. As GS 1977 *Developing Discipleship* clearly lays out discipleship is essential part of Christian life and given the deep integration of most rural congregations in community life, the development of discipleship as part of every day life is particularly pertinent. As a result, contextually appropriate approaches to rural discipleship and resources will be needed as part of broader work by dioceses. We are followers of Christ wherever God has placed us in the world and without this focus a vocation to service in the church, community and the wider world will not be possible.
 - b. Envisioning, enabling and equipping the ministry of lay people. Where mission and growth has taken place in rural multi-church groups, it is largely through the active participation of lay people, working with clergy in creative ways. Clergy will increasingly share their ministry with others, both lay and ordained, who will need to be supported and trained to take on greater responsibility, working collaboratively with others.

- c. Effective training and resourcing for clergy and lay people in rural multi-church groups. The Resourcing Ministerial Education Task Group has produced a vision for a flourishing ministry that sees collaboration and the development of the ministry of lay people as essential. The Rural Affairs Group looks forward to working with the Task Group and Ministry Division to ensure that preparation of clergy for multi-church ministry develops skills and attributes that facilitate collaboration and oversight.
 - d. The simplification of governance and legal structures, the requirements to have officers in almost every church needs urgent attention. We welcome GS 1980, particularly Recommendation 12 and subject to Synod's agreement, look forward to working with the simplification group to lift the burdens that are felt by clergy and laity alike. In addition administration needs to be resourced properly and effectively. It is encouraging that some dioceses are already developing creative solutions to this challenge but more needs to be done.
 - e. Building creative ecumenical partnerships. There is much that we can do together, especially in rural areas where populations are small and congregations are often without the critical mass to do outreach. Our ecumenical colleagues are key partners for mission and growth in rural communities. However, we need to examine and break down the barriers that prevent these relationships from developing their full potential.
5. There is much synergy between *Released for Mission* and *Working Together: the future of rural Church of England schools* published by the National Society in October 2014. Maintaining and developing creative relationships with schools is a very important way of engaging with children and young people present in rural communities. Any future strategies for rural mission and ministry must include this as a priority.
 6. The Arthur Rank Centre, the ecumenical resource for rural churches, has developed a wide range of relevant and practical materials for use in rural multi-church groups. The Rural Affairs Group anticipates working with the Arthur Rank Centre as they research good practice in leadership, the development of the ministry of lay people, mission and growth in rural multi-church groups through the *Germinate* programme.
 7. This research is the starting point. Further research needs to be done to identify and share good practice in all areas of the life of rural churches. We commend the work that is already being done in diocese, deaneries, multi-church groups and parishes to share the good news with others.
 8. This is an opportunity for Synod to reflect on and discuss the research and its recommendations, and the implications for mission and ministry in rural multi-church groups. We urge members to endorse the findings of this research, and dioceses to apply them urgently, so that faith, hope and love can be nurtured and shared in rural communities.

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 Chair of the Rural Affairs Group
 January 2015