

GENERAL SYNOD

Released for Mission: growing the rural church – implementing the recommendations; acting on the debate

Update on progress since February 2015

1. The publication of *Released for Mission* and the enthusiastic debate at General Synod in February 2015 stimulated a resurgence of interest in rural mission and ministry, and the recognition that action needed to be taken to release the potential for growth in the rural church. Over 20 dioceses have held day or residential conferences, instigated reviews, taken steps to improve training and support for rural clergy and congregations, or started a process of strategy development for rural areas. Numerous deanery synods and chapters, local PCCs, Team and benefice councils are discussing the report and looking at how to implement its recommendations.
2. The Rural Affairs Group of General Synod [RAG] is committed to working in partnership with others across the church to ensure that, as Synod requested during the debate, the recommendations made in *Released for Mission* are implemented effectively at national, diocesan and local level, in ways that are complementary to the Reform and Renewal Programme. The RAG is also committed to ensuring that the impetus created by this initiative continues so that the changes needed to release the rural church for mission are realised.
3. The Synod debate saw a strong call for a new story to be told of the rural church in place of a common narrative of one of smallness, decline and failure. Because this misleading generalisation has become so current in the church many rural congregations no longer recognise the good things that they are already doing or have the potential to do. An important part of the response to *Released for Mission* is therefore to assist the rural church to tell that new story about itself, a story that is honest and realistic but also encourages and challenges congregations to develop positively and creatively for the future in such a way that growth is realised.
4. Engagement with the Reform and Renewal programme has been a priority activity, with submissions made to three of the task groups.
 - Resourcing Ministerial Education:
 - the importance of proper training for rural multi-church ministry in Initial Ministerial Education Phases 1 and 2 and in Continuing Ministerial Development
 - the need for training and development in collaborative leadership
 - encouraging a broad inclusive interpretation of lay ministries, that focuses on the ministry of all believers
 - the need for more curacies in rural multi-church groups.
 - Simplification Task Group:
 - increased flexibility so that structures can be easily shaped to the situation and its needs
 - simplification of the process to create united parishes and other structures

- a relaxation in the requirements for officers for every church and PCC
 - greater clarity on the tasks and responsibilities that currently fall to the incumbent with a view to allowing some to be assigned to others
 - the simplification of the requirements for APCMs and electoral rolls.
- Churches Building Review – the recommendations made included that each diocese conduct a review of its portfolio of church buildings to identify how each could be used as a tool for mission; how mission can be developed where festival churches are created; legal functions currently vested in the incumbent relating to the church building be exercised by another appointed person.
5. The third recommendation in *Released for Mission* recognised the need to build a culture of discipleship within rural congregations. An initial research project has started to understand how discipleship and spirituality are sustained and developed by clergy and existing congregations and to explore more about making new disciples in rural communities, with an emphasis on the application of the Christian faith to living in community and love of neighbour.
 6. The National Rural Officer continues to work in fruitful partnership with Ministry Division particularly in relation to work on vocation, the Ministry Experience Scheme and discipleship.
 7. Partnership with the Arthur Rank Centre and its Germinate Programme of training for multi-church groups and church leaders, continues to bear fruit, benefiting from an ecumenical approach which strengthens the resources available for rural churches and enables denominations to learn from each other. *Equipping for Rural Mission* - a resource to enable rural congregations to engage creatively with their communities, has just been updated and republished. A new resource on tackling isolation and loneliness in rural communities is now available via www.germinate.net. Research on leadership and the development of lay ministry in rural multi-church groups will be available early in 2016.
 8. There is much work still to be done and future plans include:
 - a development day in May 2016 for bishops from rural dioceses to explore mission strategies in rural areas
 - a project to draw together existing good practice in providing administrative support in rural multi-church groups and deaneries will start early in 2016
 - a resource for parishes and benefices to act on *Released for Mission* and a separate resource for dioceses will be published during 2016
 - other areas of interest comprise enabling the provision of locally accessible and relevant training for lay and ordained; encouraging training institutions to provide training in rural mission and ministry; encouraging rural churches to deepen their relationships with schools and continue to develop Fresh Expressions.

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