

Learning from Creative Thinking and Planning for Rural Mission and Growth



SUMMARY VERSION



INTRODUCTION

Several rural areas in England have developed strategic approaches to mission and growth that are starting to show benefits. This document briefly outlines nine examples of good practice, offering useful ideas and approaches that could be deployed in other rural places. These nine case studies have been drawn together from some of the contributions to a Renewal & Reform seminar on Rural Mission and Growth that took place in February 2018. These studies have been summarised from a much longer document, containing many more useful details, which can be found at www.churchofengland.org/rural

Our rural church is showing that with prayer, listening, careful focus on what God is prompting, reflection and action, positive changes can come that will enable more people to come to know God in their lives. Change takes time and patience, there are barriers that need to be overcome, and some things will not work first time or even at all. These nine examples illustrate the diversity of approaches to enabling and developing mission and growth in rural communities. One size does not fit all. It is important to play to the strengths of clergy and congregations. Being strategic is not a bar to the Holy Spirit. All nine case studies reflect a mixed economy approach to parish ministry, with new approaches sitting alongside existing Sunday worship. Strategic Development Fund investment has been important for only two of the initiatives. The other initiatives and ideas have come out of local response to opportunities and needs.

If you take three things from this document, let them be:

1. **Prayer** is the bedrock on which everything is built. It is the essential starting point for everything and should continue through all initiatives and events.
2. Do things **together**. Create a team of people, making use of the gifts and skills God has already provided – from churches, wider communities, and other denominations and organisations.
3. **Review**: pray, listen, reflect, pray and then adapt, change or stop.

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SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNING

- **Prayer is the basis of everything that bears fruit** – whether this is for a diocesan strategy or for individual parishes and multi-church groups.
- Expect things to take time and have patience when things do not happen as expected.
- Be positive and creative. Identify good stories of what is already happening in the parish or benefice and engender confidence in existing congregations by telling these stories.
- Use the gifts, skills, resources and ideas you have and build on them. Try to avoid worrying about what you do not have.
- Outreach takes all shapes and forms. Take time to listen to and pray about the needs of the communities, identifying together what might be appropriate for people.
- Activities, outreach and other projects are best done in partnership with other churches, other people and other organisations in the community. Think ecumenically.
- Don't run initiatives simply with a view to bringing new people to traditional Sunday worship. They are unlikely to do this. And communicate this to existing congregations.
- Strategically used posts, such as a pioneers or missionaries, can help build relationships, encourage and enable people, and act as catalysts for new activities and initiatives.
- The mixed economy is hard work, but worth it for the spiritual and numerical growth it can bring.
- **Create teams of lay and ordained people working together for new initiatives** – in parishes or across a benefice.
- It is essential to enable, develop and encourage the ministry and mission of lay people in all aspects of the life and work of the church in rural communities.
- Provide training and development for lay people as locally as possible. Long travel times and distances are a barrier to learning and participation.
- What are the small steps that can be taken – the 'one-degree shifts' that can help people explore faith afresh or perhaps for the first time?
- Locally based learning communities are a good way of providing space for people to pray, learn together, share experience and expertise. They are helpful in encouraging fresh expressions of church and the renewal of inherited church.
- Culture change is helped by lots of small actions, communicating well and repeatedly, and incorporating an expectation of change into different aspects of church life, which together nudge congregations and benefices towards change.
- Strategies for multi-church groups do not have to be complicated and can be shaped to help encourage mission.
- Church buildings can be a tool for mission – especially when working in partnership with the community.
- Long-term patient engagement with the whole community is needed for mission and growth in rural areas. There are unlikely to be quick fixes.
- **Review, take feedback, reflect and pray. Be prepared to adapt, change or stop.**

1. INTERGENERATIONAL MISSIONERS IN THE DIOCESE OF HEREFORD

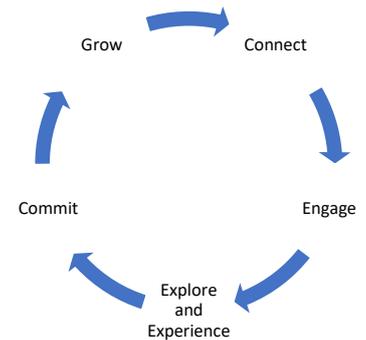
After a period of listening to churches, to communities and listening for God, the Diocese of Hereford began developing its Mission Action Plan (MAP), aiming for a bigger, bolder action that would make a real difference to achieving significant missional growth.

The diocese has formed a dispersed mission team of locally-deployed lay Intergenerational Missioners. The Missioners are catalysts for mission and growth, bringing expertise, energy and experience into six key parishes (three market towns; three large, lower-income) and impacting deaneries and the diocese as a whole.

- 80% of their time is spent in their assigned parish; and
- 20% of their time is with the diocesan Mission Support Team.

The cost is shared:

- 25% local parish,
- 25% diocesan funds, and
- 50% from Strategic Development Funding.



The Missioners aim to improve parish confidence by encouraging ‘little steps’, supporting parishes to develop ways in which they can **connect** with new contacts, **engage** in building relationships and help people to take steps to **explore and experience** faith, support others to **commit** to following Jesus Christ and **grow** in their faith (and support their own growth as disciples).

Rural parishes have five significant connecting points with local people:

LIFE EVENTS FESTIVALS SCHOOLS OPEN CHURCHES ONLINE

The diocese has seen notable success building new congregations with Messy Churches, Forest Churches and Café Churches.

It is tempting to think that what works for rural will not work for market towns, but so far, Hereford are not finding this to be true. It takes the same attention to relationships, follow-up, engagement and the nurturing of faith journeys. Intentionality is just as key – along with collaboration and everyone taking part in God’s mission. The changes that have taken place in rural ministry over the past few years, including re-imagining of the role of clergy and strong collaboration between ordained and lay, are becoming more relevant to clergy in market towns. As market towns start to see a mixed economy of congregations grow, more confident lay leaders and teams will be needed.

Seeking mutual flourishing and growth, Hereford is seeing greater ecumenical collaboration and work with different denominations. Where ecumenical links are strong, and mission focused, spiritual and numerical growth is taking place. Hereford is also seeing an increasing number of people – ordained, lay, paid and unpaid workers – wanting to be part of its intergenerational mission work.

2. THE BEAMINSTER PROJECT IN THE DIOCESE OF SALISBURY

In April 2012, the Beaminster Team began with prayer. Before anything new was started, for an entire year, a dozen people met weekly to pray in silence and listen to God. Then, carefully, with patience and prayer, the team began trialling mission projects.

The team's first project, Lent 2013: a four-week trial of an after-school club in one of the church schools. Five years on, the project flourishes. 25% of the school attend and the volunteer team can now operate with no clergy present.

Other flourishing projects: Walk in Wednesday; Messy Church; Breakfast@10; Community of the Annunciation; 10.15@Salway Ash; Pilgrim discipleship course; Christmas Outreach workshops.

As projects flourished, the team saw their spiritual energy and enthusiasm waning. Their prayer life had diminished as their workload grew. They began again, and God faithfully answered. This was their wakeup call: only when they prayed did things continue to grow.

Financing can be tricky, but God has provided. The team set up a Mission Fund, but it has taken six years to help PCCs and people take financial responsibility for mission. Every project is free at point of access, though there is opportunity for donations; but most projects are cheap and some even make money.

Only one project has failed, and the team believe this is because they didn't follow their normal strategy: pray, recruit a team, trial, feedback, then establish the project.

The projects have led to a mixed economy in Beaminster, which has its challenges. Some projects are immediately successful, others take time and require the building of good relationships and trust. Maintaining tradition whilst starting new things is time consuming. Programme-centred approaches to discipleship (such as Start, Alpha or Pilgrim) are only part of the solution. Finding time to walk alongside individuals and help them discover God is key. Lastly, raising up teams and enabling people to lead is difficult; the team feel they still have some way to go building confidence in people to manage without clergy support.

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE BEAMINSTER TEAM:

- Assemble and equip your team before you start anything.
- Trial things if you can, then look for feedback and react to it.
- Don't go too fast: pray, plan and then pray some more.
- Do one thing and do it well – don't overstretch volunteers.
- Build up community partners and connections.
- Good relationships with schools bear fruit.
- Presence and visibility help things happen.
- Don't be afraid to dream, don't be afraid to fail, and don't be afraid.
- It takes time to build trust but once people trust you, they will come with you.
- Enable everyone to be involved (if they want to).
- Help discern individuals' particular, God-given calling.
- Don't feel a failure if traditional church is declining. Be encouraged by small growth.

BEAMINSTER
 12 parishes
 15 church buildings
 6 schools
 1 town, 15 villages
 6,000 people

4. CULTURE CHANGE IN LORDSBRIDGE

The culture of a community is held within and reinforced by the language, symbols, rituals and stories of that community. The Lordsbridge Team, in Cambridgeshire, are building a network of worshipping communities.

In the last four years, the number of worshipping communities in the Lordsbridge network has risen from 11 to 16. These include 11 traditional worshipping communities in ancient parish churches, a loose youth community, a weekday toddler church, a monthly ‘tea and prayers’ seniors meeting, and a few more.

LORDSBRIDGE
 11 villages
 11 parishes
 45 square miles
 12,300 people

Each worshipping community has a ‘lead minister’, who can be lay or ordained, paid or unpaid, and can be shared with another community. Each lead minister develops their own local team. The lead ministers together make up a core team, which meets weekly. The core team was enhanced by the addition of a Pioneer Curate, providing missional role modelling and coaching.

THE CHALLENGES

- Only a small proportion of people in each parish church ‘get’ the idea of working as a network. The previous culture around being a village church is deeply embedded.
- New worshipping communities are fragile. An earlier one has now ‘closed’ as people have moved on – though a number of things have been learned from the experience.
- There is a need to grow more lay leaders and ministry team members equipped to lead mission projects. There are more ideas/opportunities than people to implement them.
- The Pioneer Curate has recently moved on, so the team needs to find another way to keep this degree of focus on speaking about and modelling mission. One day, being pioneering and missional will be embedded in the culture but, until then, an intentional focus of specialist hours keeps Lordsbridge moving in that direction.
- When there is a vacancy, recruitment of clergy who can easily fit into this trajectory of culture change is vital. The wrong appointment could cause the whole team to go backwards or to pause while the new person ‘catches up’.
- It is easy to do something for a while and then forget to reinforce it sufficiently for it to make a lasting impact as other things distract.

KEY ADVICE

- Little and often, and often repeated, is the best policy for culture change.
- Bringing in someone new, such as a pioneer, is a good way of disturbing the existing system and precipitating change. But make sure you have the right person in mind.
- Be sure that this model of a network of worshipping communities fits your context.
- Change the way you describe the team or benefice and find ways of symbolically and literally reinforcing the new description.
- Think about how to provide administrative support centrally for economies of scale.
- Grow local shared leadership and shared ministry in every way you can.
- Be in it for the long haul – culture change takes a long time.

5. MISSION SHEDS IN THE DIOCESE OF EXETER

The Diocese of Exeter's Local Mission Resource Hubs (called Mission Sheds) are locally based and gather three or four times a year. Three Mission Sheds are in rural contexts.

Through Mission Sheds, the diocese aims to help people grow in confidence as part of their church communities or teams involved with faith sharing, starting new congregations, exploring whole life discipleship, or starting fresh expressions of church. The network offers consultancy and peer mentoring.

Once a year the diocese hosts a Mission Shed Central event – a whole-day Saturday gathering, with key note speakers and a seminar stream. These have had good attendance (around 100 at each event), with both clergy and lay Christians across different traditions.

CORE AIMS

- Share good practice in growing inherited church or fresh expressions of church.
- Encourage the initiation of new, and growth of existing, fresh expressions of church.
- Provide a learning community where pioneers, incumbents, lay practitioners and lay teams can learn from each other, be assisted, and energised for mission and growth.
- Provide or identify resource partnerships for those hoping to trial a fresh expression of church, or re-expression of inherited church, that shows potential for growth.
- Enable intentional learning, prayer, church planting, discipleship and evangelism.
- Accompany and travel alongside those seeking to develop and grow church.

KEY LESSONS

- The diocese is encouraging its vision for collaborative ministry by ensuring that there is a coordination team for each Mission Shed, comprised of lay and ordained people.
- There is a wide variation of understanding of what it means to be a mission-shaped church. Many lay people who attend Mission Sheds are finding that obstacles to outreach and mission are not entirely due to building related issues. They also stem from long-term lack of vision from clergy and a resistance to change from people who hold positions of power and influence in the local church. That said, there are places where people are both growing as disciples and developing rural networks.
- The word evangelism casts fear into the hearts of many! Use of different descriptions helps rural churches see that some of the ministry they are already engaged in, and are good at, is part of being evangelistic.
- The culture of hospitality, encouragement and empowerment is especially welcomed, and informal networks are starting to develop across parochial boundaries.
- Given the isolation that rural churches often experience, people enjoy meeting up with a common purpose and are finding the interaction develops their way of thinking about new ideas or develops their thinking on how to start new things in church.
- Building awareness is taking longer than anticipated. The busyness of local church leaders often means that their attendance is not as wide spread as desired. The diocese is looking into ways of improving communications with hard-to-reach congregations.

6. THE DIOCESE OF EXETER'S GROWING THE RURAL CHURCH PROJECT

The Diocese of Exeter's Growing the Rural Church project (GtRC) is funded to provide support to 100 rural churches between 2017 and 2023. The project supports rural mission communities to partner with local communities and external agencies to find sustainable missional, community, commercial and cultural uses for church buildings.

'If we want to grow in prayer, make new disciples and serve the people of Devon with joy, then how do we use our church buildings to support our activities?'

The project's engagement with a mission community usually starts during mission action planning conversations. The GtRC team meets with PCC and congregation members in preparation for supporting them to consult with their community about the church building. The outcome of a consultation varies according to the context, but it is always GtRC's aim to ensure a wide cross section of the community is drawn into the conversation and the life of the rural church building going forward.

TWO KEY LESSONS

1. People are passionate about heritage buildings. For many people, the church building is 'their' church – a symbol of their village and should be open and available to them (however often they chose to engage with it).
2. To rural worshipping communities, their church building often feels more of a burden than a blessing. Too often, 'dealing' with the building takes rural mission communities away from their desire to be 'church' as the people of God in their communities.

The GtRC team are beginning to see glimpses of what can happen when conversations are facilitated between people with one or both of these passions in local communities. Step by step, more churches are reclaiming their role at the centre of their communities – as places of worship, pieces of heritage, and places that meet community needs.

Worshipping and non-worshipping members of communities come together to ask:

- What does our community need?
- How might our church, as a people and a building, meet that need?

Success has been seen when a real church-community partnership emerges (rather than the worshipping community taking yet more on and adding to their 'to do' list).

The team have learned that this approach takes time – more time than initially anticipated. From initial engagement to a sustainable plan is at least a 12 to 18-month process.

The other thing learned is that the team's supportive relationship with rural churches and their local communities doesn't end when a sustainable plan has emerged and initially implemented. The team are regularly called upon for ongoing advice and troubleshooting. Going forward, the team are planning in more capacity both during project delivery and ongoing monitoring phases.

7. SIMPLE BUT EFFECTIVE IDEAS IN SOUTH LAFFORD

The parish of South Lafford in the Diocese of Lincoln has 11 rural churches and became a united benefice 40 years ago – but people are only just beginning to get used to it. These are small villages with populations ranging from 650 to 5.

The benefice has used the individual characteristics and space (or lack of it) of each church building, and the gifts of villagers, to develop specialisms for different churches in the group. In addition, people are encouraged to travel to churches outside their village, with the hosting church offering hospitality, welcome and Christian fellowship. This helps small communities feel less isolated and part of the wider parish. It also allows people to worship together in larger groups; and a good sense of fellowship has resulted.

Simple but effective ideas have helped develop the confidence of individual villagers and a sense that they are contributing to the whole parish. Occasional church-goers have been encouraged; and the team have had a lot of fun, as well as some deep spiritual experiences.

The best ideas are ones that have come from the villagers themselves – they know what they can do best and the special interests of the locals. There is nothing terribly original about any of these ideas – it is the variety on offer within the multi-church parish which is noteworthy and, crucially, the workload is shared.

- The Lady Chapel at Newton is ideal for quiet, small-group meditation. Here, a ‘Prayer and a Pint’ session is a weekly, Friday night, half-hour silent prayer followed by social time in the Red Lion pub down the road.
- Scott Willoughby (population 5) has the smallest open church in Lincolnshire. It has no water or electricity, so the benefice use it for candlelit services, especially Candlemas – when a candle is blessed for each of the 11 churches of the parish.
- The South Lafford Choir travels round the parish for the weekly Parish Eucharist, but rehearses and has a regular Choral Evensong in Folkingham.
- St Nicholas’ Church, Walcot, starts the Christmas season each year with a ‘Santa Service’ on the Sunday nearest 6 December. Walcot is a small village, but this service has proved a popular attraction – a bit different from the normal carol service. For the last couple of years, a village lunch in a local pub has been arranged to coincide with the service.
- A very successful ‘Pimms and Pâté’ celebration takes place after the main All Saints Day service at the Church of St Mary and All Saints, Swarby. The hospitality is always so good that it has become traditional in this church for the wake after funerals to be held in the church.
- St Denys’ Church, Aswarby, has a link with Australia. George Bass, the explorer who discovered the straits between the mainland and Tasmania, was born and baptised here. The local school has developed a link with a school in Victoria. This has been helpful in getting a Heritage Lottery Grant of nearly £250,000 for the repair of the spire.
- St Lucia’s, Dembleby, celebrates St Lucia’s Day with a procession.
- St Peter ad Vincula, Threekingham, is planning an informal café church in the large space at the back of the church.

8. *ORISON* PRAYER IN THE DIOCESE OF SALISBURY

The Whitton Benefice in the Diocese of Salisbury comprises six villages within easy reach of several towns in Wiltshire. There are four schools – three of which are Voluntary Aided.

The idea for this initiative was to provide an immersive experience of different ways to pray, using sensory, tactile and contemplative aids.

Entitled *Orison* – an old word for prayer – the Whitton Team took over a reasonably large church for a week and set up a series of prayer stations. The team made use of everything they had to hand, including gazebos, screens and imaginative lighting to help separate out the different experiences of prayer.



The primary audience was older primary school children, but the team noticed that the adults that came also participated deeply. Local congregation members and clergy acted as guides and supporters, as well as providing a shuttle transport service from the schools to the church.

Sue Rodd, a Whitton Benefice Team Vicar, described the initiative as an intensely moving experience for many and a great way of helping children and adults pray and experience a wider variety of ways to pray.

Prayer Spaces in Schools has a wide range of resources to help support similar initiatives. Visit www.prayerspacesinschools.com

9. TELLING THE REAL STORY OF CHRISTMAS IN THE MARLBOROUGH DEANERY

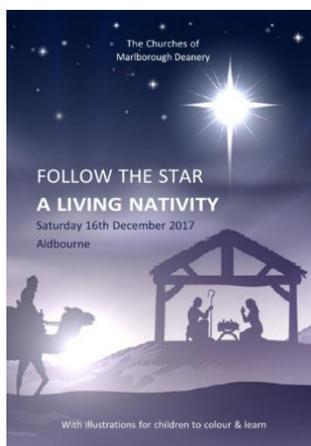
Marlborough Deanery is a combination of small Wiltshire villages and the medium-sized town of Marlborough. In December 2017, the deanery got together in the village of Aldbourne to tell the real story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The living nativity was intended to be an interactive way of conveying the true meaning of Christmas, speaking something of the reality of the circumstances in which it happened and putting the commercialization of Christmas in its right place. The creative team behind the project wanted people to be part of the journey, to be able to ask questions, to listen, look, smell and experience the story – bringing it to life in a memorable way.

In the dark, over 300 participants followed the star to four scenes of the nativity around the village green.

- The Annunciation and the prophets in the Memorial Hall.
- The angels and shepherds on the west part of the green.
- Herod and the kings in St Michael’s Church.
- The Nativity with Mary, Joseph and Jesus, on the east side of the Green in a marquee.

Each scene ended with an opportunity for the audience to ask questions of the actors portraying each character. Programmes were available that contained the Christmas story and questions to think about and discuss at home. The whole event was fuelled by prayer along with the involvement of the whole community and very careful planning.



For a comprehensive write up of how this event was put on – including logistics, insurance and management of people, see the annexe of the full Learning from Creative Thinking and Planning for Rural Mission and Growth report: ‘Telling the real story of Christmas’. Visit churchofengland.org/rural

CONTRIBUTORS

The Learning from Creative Thinking and Planning for Rural Mission and Growth report was compiled by Jill Hopkinson in the summer of 2018. We are extremely grateful to all those who contributed to this work and have allowed for many to learn from their hard and faithful work across rural England.

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For further information, links to other church resources and the full version of the Learning from Creative Thinking and Planning for Rural Mission and Growth report, visit [churchofengland.org/rural](https://www.churchofengland.org/rural)

We provide training, additional resources and practical support for rural churches and congregations with our ecumenical partners through **Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre**. Visit [germinate.net](https://www.germinate.net) for more information.

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