

# **Seeds in Holy Ground – a future for the rural church?**

## **A Background Briefing from the Mission and Public Affairs Council**

### **Introduction**

1. Churches are a major but often unrecognised and under valued contributor to rural communities, by their ubiquitous presence and the informal and formal involvement of their members with the community. Not only do they contribute to the quality of relationships, mutuality and trust of friendships and informal caring, but they are the building blocks of a vibrant and living community. Many rural areas also have key services and facilities provided by churches carrying out active and loving mission and ministry, either alone or working in partnership with others. Much of this work is overlooked or undervalued by Government (national, regional and local) and by other voluntary and community groups.
2. This debate is part of a process of raising the awareness of the great value of the rural church to rural community life, seeking equal treatment with other voluntary and community organisations in terms of membership of representative bodies such as local strategic partnerships, rural forums and other local and regional bodies, as well as access to sources of funding and advice. Without this proper recognition rural churches are excluded from partnerships seeking to deliver important rural services and facilities on behalf of Government. This is to the detriment of such partnerships and the communities they serve.

3. Many rural parishes are grouped together into larger units, as multi-parish benefices or team ministries, where several churches are served by one or a small number of clergy. Many rural churches are run by lay people with the assistance and oversight of an ordained person who lives somewhere else. Responsibility for maintaining an effective and living Christian presence in that place will lie with Churchwardens, Parochial Church Councils, ecumenical partners, Local Ministry Teams, Readers and members of the congregation. Adequate training for both individuals and groups and support for collaborative working is essential for the rural church to survive and thrive. Dioceses need to provide the resources for this to happen and promote ecumenical co-operation locally.

## **A Changing Rural Life**

4. **Rural England is changing.** During 2004 the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) introduced new definitions of rurality. 9.5 million people are considered to live in rural England, 19% of the population of England. The majority live in the areas surrounding large towns and cities (defined by Defra as ‘less sparsely populated areas’), with only 600,000 people living in what Defra now terms ‘sparsely populated areas’ including parts of Devon, Cornwall, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Yorkshire, Cumbria and Northumberland. Over half of the rural population live in villages and hamlets, the rest in market towns and isolated dwellings. Places with a population exceeding 10,000 are classed as being urban.
5. **The population of rural England** is ageing with 2.2 million people aged over 60 (some 23% of the rural

population). The proportion of rural people in the older age categories (aged 60+) is higher than for urban areas, particularly in 'sparsely populated areas'. There is a corresponding lower proportion of young people (aged 15-29) in these rural areas. This difference will be maintained into the future as all rural areas attract higher numbers of the middle aged (45-59). Approximately 100,000 people move from urban to rural areas each year, a net trend present for the last 20 years. So the population of rural England will continue to increase. 1.4% of the rural population is from an ethnic minority (compared to 10.9% in urban areas). Many rural areas are learning how to assimilate migrant workers, particularly from the new member countries of European Union. An estimated 60,000 seasonal migrant workers come to Britain each year to carry out a wide of tasks on farms and in pack houses as well as in hotels and restaurants in rural areas.

6. **The lack of affordable housing** in the countryside is a major problem. There is a high demand for housing in rural areas, caused by the increasing rural population. House prices in many rural areas are very high and are becoming less affordable, particularly to those on average or low incomes. It is often only higher income earners working in larger towns and cities who can afford to buy homes in many villages. The numbers of affordable homes are insufficient to cope with the demand, particularly for low income families, single people and the elderly. There is a similar lack of social rented accommodation. This contributes to the exodus of young people from the countryside and the increasing but hidden homelessness experienced by people forced to live with families or friends as no other accommodation is available. This has an additional impact on the stability of communities.

Sustainable communities need a good housing mix, but planning regulations and restrictions on charities and housing associations can make this difficult to achieve.

7. **Rural deprivation and disadvantage** are not obvious in the countryside, as those on low incomes live side by side with those on higher than average earnings. Rarely is obvious deprivation concentrated in one place and it can be hidden behind a well maintained local authority house or up a farm lane. Many rural communities live with inequalities caused by a disparity in household income. Average pay for jobs in rural areas is only 86% of that for jobs in urban areas. Social exclusion is also caused by a lack of access to public transport. Households without access to a car – which is as many as 1 in 8 households in villages in sparsely populated areas – find it difficult to obtain basic services such as health care, schools, post offices, banks and shops. This also limits the ability of the members of the household to hold down a job. Irrespective of the generally high standard of living that many rural residents have (especially those who commute into urban areas for work), those living in the more peripheral rural areas have difficulty in accessing goods and services and face higher additional costs for transport. Farmers and those on low incomes are particularly badly affected by this.
8. **Patterns of rural work.** Most rural areas no longer rely on agriculture and other land based industries such as forestry, quarrying and fishing for major sources of employment. Tourism and related hospitality businesses are important employers but tend to be in the low income sector. There is a high incidence of home-based working, owner-managed businesses and self-employment in rural areas.

Approximately 1.9% of the workforce is now employed in agriculture, although this figure is much higher in the remoter sparsely populated areas. The average age of a farmer is around 60 years old, with over 60% of farm businesses run by people aged over 55 and therefore approaching retirement. The Fresh Start Initiative aims to encourage and support new entrants into farming whilst helping established farmers think about their response to the challenges and opportunities of CAP reform. Measures to achieve this include promoting farming as an attractive career, signposting sources of help and support for new entrants, and the development of a mentoring scheme and a 'matching service' that will link potential new entrants to those wishing to leave the industry.

9. **Agricultural production** takes up 70% of the landmass of England. In the year 2000 farm incomes reached their lowest point since the 1930s. In the last four years there has been a weak but variable recovery in incomes, although there seems to have been a further fall in 2005. £133 billion is spent on food in the UK each year, with the agriculture and food sector contributing 12% to Gross Domestic Product. By itself agriculture contributes 0.8% to GDP. This shows that value is added only after produce has left the farm gate and the prices received by farmers for some commodities are only very close to the cost of production, with little or no profit. In order for many farmers to survive it is necessary for one or more members of the family to work off the farm. Many farms have sought to diversify their businesses through the letting or conversion of farm buildings, new enterprises such as shops or cafés or facilities to process milk or meat on farm. Livestock farmers are still affected by the aftermath of BSE and FMD and are still being severely affected by the high incidence

of Bovine TB, particularly in the West and South West of England. Affected herds cannot be moved or sold and much distress is caused to infected animals and to the farmers. Compensation payments do not adequately cover the real losses.

10. 2005 has seen **reform of the Common Agricultural Policy** by the introduction of a new method of subsidy payments for farmers. The Single Payment Scheme (SPS) means that farmers will no longer receive payments for production but will receive a flat rate payment for the area of land that is farmed. For many this will mean a reduction in the amount of subsidy received. The land must be kept in good agricultural condition and payment is dependant upon abiding by environmental, animal welfare and waste management regulations. A large proportion of the farmed area of England is now being pro-actively managed for conservation. Unfortunately the introduction of this new system has not been smooth and the requests for help to the Farming Help organisations such as Farm Crisis Network and the ARC-Addington Fund continue to rise.
11. Through food production and care for the environment rural areas make an essential contribution to the health and stability of the nation as a whole. This is a far cry from the perception of some that rural areas offer little to the national life and can be seen as expendable extras by unthinking urban people. The decline in the profitability and economic viability of agriculture, however, cannot solely be dealt with by continuing economies of scale. This rationalisation of smaller farm units can result in a detrimental change in land use, management regime and in the loss of people caring for the land. All this also has an impact on the surrounding local communities.

12. **The landscape of the countryside** has been shaped and formed by hundreds of years of agricultural activity. A survey by the Countryside Agency in 2003 showed that ‘95% of the UK population would like to keep the countryside the way it is.’ The countryside is still clearly a valued part of the lives of many people. The UK countryside attracts around 1.2 billion day visits each year for outdoor recreation and the quiet enjoyment of nature. 60% of those living in towns and cities visit the countryside regularly. Open access on foot to mountain, moor, heath, down and common land is now permitted throughout England. In addition there are extensive networks of footpaths and a growing number of long distance paths. Millions of visits are made each year to historic buildings, gardens and rural towns and villages. There are many thousands of visits to rural churches every year, thereby making an important contribution to the rural economy. One estimate has put the figure for church visits as high as 10 million people each year.
  
13. The countryside is inextricably linked with farming, recreation and rural community life. As such it is a place where urban, suburban and rural communities have an opportunity to mix. The countryside also makes an important contribution to wellbeing and is indispensable to a healthy future. In recent years Government has placed an increasing emphasis on the need to make the countryside more accessible to urban and minority ethnic groups. These important initiatives, if appropriately managed, can only be beneficial for increasing understanding of the countryside, farming and food production.

14. A survey carried out in 2004 by the Countryside Agency showed that out of 14 possible choices the five most important facilities for rural residents are: a pub, village hall, local shop, primary school and church. This provides us with a major challenge for mission. The church is a valued and wanted part of rural society. How do we as church respond to the great potential of rural areas as well as the problems and needs of rural people, just some of which are highlighted here?

### **Vibrant Rural Communities**

15. **Churches** are a major but often unrecognised and under valued contributor to rural communities, by their ubiquitous presence and their informal and formal community engagement. The contribution of rural churches to the building of social capital and community capacity building is a significant factor in rural community development. This contribution is only partially recognised by some parts of Government and rarely acknowledged by the wider voluntary and community sector. It is 16 years since the publication of *Faith in the Countryside*, which first recognised the important role of the rural church in building and sustaining community in rural areas. A research project is currently being carried out by the University of Coventry, the Church of England and the Arthur Rank Centre to describe and assess the contribution of the rural church to social capital, the ability of rural communities to develop themselves, and to the formation of vibrant communities. This will report in the summer of 2006.
16. **Social capital** is a term used by academics and policy makers to describe a wide variety of quite specific benefits



that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with good social networks. *‘The features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.’* It is the ordinary formal and informal actions and interactions of individuals and groups that benefit people and communities.

17. The three terms ‘**networks**’, ‘**norms**’ and ‘**trust**’ are important and have theological significance reflecting: relationships; the values or self-understanding underpinning those relationships; and the outcomes that flow from them. Social capital definitions generally invest these terms with positive meaning. However, relationships, values and behavioural outcomes may equally be negative. The need is for organisations, processes and structures which sustain and increase the social capital, that create value, and values, for the people who are part of the connectedness, part of congregation or community, and, at least sometimes, for those beyond the community as well. There is a resonance here with the Christian gospel.
18. Commentators have suggested that there are three **different types of social capital** in common use: bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding social capital is to be found in strong relationships, friendships and networks within communities (and congregations), it is the ‘glue’ that holds people and communities together. Bridging social capital exists in the networks that stretch across both the formal and informal social groups and organisations that provide the ‘oil’ of community life. It is reflected in the multi-hattedness of individuals within rural communities where a member of the local church may also be a member of the Women’s Institute, on the Village Hall Committee, help out with an

after school club and even be a regular in the pub. Linking social capital describes those networks and connections between different communities and institutions. Linking social capital is formed in that ‘chain’ of connections that are made outside the immediate locality of the community to external organisations such as district councils, charitable organisations and importantly to other communities, whether in the immediate locality, nationally or even internationally. The three types impact on one another with different outcomes, not all of them positive. For example strong bonding social capital, where it is to be found in exclusive or inward looking groups, may militate against the development of effective bridging capital, through closure to new people or ideas. Some forms of strong linking capital may, for example through a concentration of power, decision making or resources, lead to the de-skilling local people and an over-dependency on external leadership, and so undermine the development of effective local bonding capital.

19. The reality in most rural parishes is that bonding and bridging social capital overlap one another. There is no fine dividing line between the relationships and actions within the congregation and those within the community. Faith may therefore be expressed in the rural context more frequently in wider community projects than in solely church related projects and activities.
20. Social capital is an important concept, underlining the social engagement that gives people access to support, opportunities and information which enables them to pursue their own goals and achieve well-being. Strong social capital can foster trust and build a community’s capacity to further organise and prosper. The contribution

by the church is both vital and unique. Uniquely it witnesses in its own life to God, the Holy Trinity, whose own nature is that of three persons in dynamic communion, expressed in an outpouring of compassionate love and the sharing of the human condition. The more we are drawn into Christ in a response of faithful worship, mission and service, the more we exhibit those bonds of mutuality, co-operation and trust of which the theorists of social capital all speak.

21. Mutuality, co-operation and trust contribute most to social capital. In practical terms the church can play a vital role in fostering friendships, supportive networks and a community of shared value. This may be seen in social projects run by the church for the community, for example lunch clubs, coffee mornings, parent and toddler groups, etc.; through the contribution of church members to other services such as Meals on Wheels, volunteer driver services etc.; by the informal caring for neighbours and friends that goes on every day, as well as in the activities of a congregation's own life. The effective rural church is well placed to influence wider society in forming a culture of mutual support, encouraging altruism and facilitating the informal networks of contacts and friendships which provide effective sources of local information, means of communication, energy and vitality, and a capacity to reach isolated people in their need. An analysis of information from the British attitudes survey, and the most recent census in 2001, has shown that the third strongest predictor of social engagement and therefore a contribution to the building of social capital, after age and class, is faith affiliation.

22. Faith based groups in general, and churches in particular are major contributors to the building of healthy and stable community life. This is therefore an extremely important factor for rural areas. In many rural communities individuals carry out several roles, for example a member of the Parish Council or a school governor as well as being a member of the church congregation. This network of contacts with different groups of people is a key opportunity for mission in rural areas. As churchgoers do not remain anonymous for long in rural communities, they cannot hide their faith away. Being a Christian in a rural community provides an embodied witness to faith in every aspect of daily life. The focus is upon the identity and connections made around a sense of parish and place. The importance of place, reinforced by the parish system is part of living out the gospel. So rural churches can contribute greatly to community by: living the life of community; adding value to the community through the activity of their members; celebrating what is good in their community and through the resources they have to offer. The church also has a responsibility to speak and act prophetically, to challenge things that undermine people and communities.

### **Mission and Ministry of the Rural Church**

23. *Seeds in Holy Ground* is a workbook for the rural church which is intended to give help and guidance to rural churches to look afresh at the future. It emphasises the need for rural churches and their congregations to be actively involved within the communities of which they are a part. The workbook makes suggestions and recommendations for proactive engagement with all aspects of rural community life. However it is important to remember that it is not quantity of things done but quality that counts for

the rural church. Rural churches are a valuable part of the Church of England's mission and need to be cherished and encouraged. *Seeds in Holy Ground* recognises the uniqueness of some of the challenges faced by rural churches but also the potential for great things that so many have.

24. **The mission of the rural church** is carried out primarily through ordinary people, shown through their lives, work and service. This outward expression of faith is the building block for the future direction of the rural church. The mission of all the people of God, cannot be limited to the place where someone lives but is shown throughout their lives, in school, place of work, sports clubs and other places of relaxation. This is especially important in rural areas where individuals have several different roles in a community and lay people are largely responsible for the daily life and work of the church. A rural church is called to be a baptismal and Eucharistic community that exists for the wider community and involved throughout it. The rural church is therefore a distinctive group, but one which does not exist for itself alone.
  
25. **The role of lay people is increasing.** In response to reducing numbers of stipendiary clergy and changes in church attendance, most rural parishes have been organised into larger groups, perhaps known as a multi-parish benefice or a team ministry. This makes difficult and complex demands on lay people and clergy alike. The problems for clergy under pressure to provide regular worship in several different places each Sunday are well known, and for many this stressful situation is not easily resolved. However the church is the whole people of God who together share responsibility for the tasks of worship,

evangelism, service and pastoral care. Lay ministry in all its many and diverse forms is essential for the future of the rural church. It needs to be fully supported and resourced by dioceses in ways that are appropriate to the local context, just as should be the case in suburbs, towns and cities. In many places rural congregations are already being both creative and experimental in ensuring an effective and living Christian presence in the heart of the communities in which they are set. *Seeds in Holy Ground* reflects some of the ideas and initiatives for mission, ministry and evangelism that are sustaining and growing many rural churches.

26. **Rural church buildings** can have much to offer to many communities. The burden of maintaining them can be considerable, but they may also be seen as a major resource for all. This is especially true where the church is the only public building remaining open. With only a small amount of adaptation churches can be used for a wide range of groups and community services ranging from after school clubs and lunch groups to a farmers market, post office and pensions advice centre. Even without adaptation some creative thinking and working in partnership with others could allow new ventures to start. Yet a Church is not just another community building. As a sacred space, hallowed by worship and prayer, embodying much of a community's story, it witnesses to the presence of God in that community, focuses and highlights it. Community building and sacred space side by side, it can offer a place of celebration and mourning, service and silence. With a church building and associated congregation in almost every rural community through the parish system and its commitment to place and through the presence of ecumenical partners, there are many opportunities for

effective mission and ministry in the countryside. Just some of these opportunities are described in *Seeds in Holy Ground*.

27. **The National Rural Officer**, Dr Jill Hopkinson, is a member of the Mission Team of the Mission and Public Affairs Division, based at the Arthur Rank Centre, the churches rural resources centre, in Warwickshire. Working with ecumenical colleagues – the Revd Graham Jones (Methodist Church and United Reformed Church) and the Director of the Arthur Rank Centre the Revd Dr Gordon Gatward – she provides resources, information and training for those working in rural ministry. Training is offered nationally and to dioceses and deaneries on rural culture and context, mission and ministry in the countryside and the management of multi-parish benefices. The National Rural Officer has responsibility for monitoring Government rural policy and liaises at national level with Defra, the Commission for Rural Communities and voluntary and community sector organisations. Co-ordination and support is given to the network of diocesan Rural Officers and the National Rural Officer is secretary to the Rural Affairs Committee of General Synod and the Rural Bishops Panel. This post, which was until 2002 fully funded by the Archbishops' Council budget General Synod, is now 60% funded by grant aid from charitable trusts with grants currently covering the period until the end of 2007.
28. The **Arthur Rank Centre** in Warwickshire has, for the last 34 years, been the Churches' ecumenical rural resources centre. The Arthur Rank Centre has a wide range of information and resources on rural mission and ministry. It is able to offer training to those new to rural ministry. The Centre for Studies in Rural Ministry, run with the

University of Wales, Bangor offers continuing professional development in rural ministry and is open to all. The Life and Faith in Rural Communities is a new venture to provide online resources, backed up with book purchasing and other physical resources, for those working in rural mission and ministry ([www.arcresources.org.uk](http://www.arcresources.org.uk)).

29. **The Arthur Rank Centre has several community development projects** currently in operation. These include Hidden Britain, rural regeneration through sustainable community owned tourism ([www.hidden-britain.co.uk](http://www.hidden-britain.co.uk)); the Care Farming Network to support farmers offering rehabilitation and care for ex-offenders, the mentally and physically disabled and young offenders; and Eco-Congregation, a project to encourage churches to integrate creation care into their life and mission. It provides resources, high quality support and awards for successful projects ([www.ecocongregation.org.uk](http://www.ecocongregation.org.uk)). *Country Way* magazine is published three times each year providing ideas, information and inspiration to those involved with rural mission ([www.arcresources.org.uk](http://www.arcresources.org.uk)). Staff of the centre co-ordinate networks of denominational Rural Officers and Agricultural Chaplains. They are also available for consultation on specific issues such as rural culture and society, agriculture, farming support, community use of church buildings, Government rural policy, the rural voluntary and community sector, liturgy and worship resources. Some members of staff are available to speak and preach at services and other events.

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