

RESOURCING RURAL MINISTRY

The cover features a collage of three images. The top right shows a church with a tall, pointed steeple. The middle left shows a church with a cross on its roof. The bottom right shows a group of diverse people, including men, women, and children, running joyfully across a grassy field.

PRACTICAL
INSIGHTS
FOR MISSION

Simon Martin

with Caroline Hewlett, Rona Orme
and Becky Payne

Edited by Jill Hopkinson

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Published by

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700

Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk

Website: www.brf.org.uk

BRF is a Registered Charity

ISBN 978 0 85746 262 6

First published 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Foreword

This book is a vital, timely and practical resource for rural mission and ministry. Contrary to the perception in some quarters, mission is flourishing in many rural communities and rural churches can be good at mission if they allow time and space for it to take place. Rural churches are at the forefront of the development of the ministry of lay people, shared ministry and fresh expressions. Rural church members are typically deeply involved in their communities and with local schools, and are often working ecumenically.

Yet there remain major challenges. As stipendiary clergy numbers fall, collaborative ministry and ecumenical working become essential. This in turn requires changes in leadership style, lay 'ownership' of mission, an openness to change, and a fresh look at how we use buildings, in order to sustain and develop an effective Christian presence in every community.

There are no quick answers but this book contains a remarkable range of resources to inspire, encourage and equip rural church members and leaders. The approach and content outlined are part of the developing Germinate programme of resources and training created by the Arthur Rank Centre (www.germinate.net).

Finally, I want to pay tribute to Simon Martin, who worked on this book before he fell seriously ill in 2014; to the other expert contributors—Caroline Hewlett, Rona Orme and Becky Payne; to my colleague Canon Dr Jill Hopkinson whose careful editing made this such a valuable and usable resource; and to BRF for their vision and patient support.

Jerry Marshall, CEO, The Arthur Rank Centre

Introduction

Jill Hopkinson

This is a book for people from any denomination, lay or ordained, with an interest in rural church mission and ministry. It draws together ideas, information and resources developed over several years by the Arthur Rank Centre (ARC). The book uses practical examples from several denominations to illustrate the key points and show the potential for local churches to be carriers of God's love to their rural communities.

The Arthur Rank Centre, the ecumenical resource centre for rural churches established in 1972, has long provided support, resources and ideas for use by rural congregations and communities. This book continues the work, developing a focus on the ministry of lay people, which will be so essential for the future of churches in rural areas.

Ministry, not just ministers

We believe passionately that Christian ministry is not the sole preserve of those who are ordained. This book is based on an underlying theological conviction that ministry is the responsibility and privilege of the whole body of Christ in any locality.

For some, perhaps many, in rural areas, convictions about lay ministry may be essentially pragmatic, arising from the observation that the number of clergy in rural areas has declined. This is particularly so where large numbers

of churches have been brought together, and it holds true across different denominations and in a wide variety of rural contexts. So a growing commitment to ministry by the whole people of God may be driven by the recognition that 'we don't have our own minister any more' and the conclusion, 'so now we'll all have to muck in'.

However, it is increasingly recognised that there is a fundamental biblical, theological and ecclesiological affirmation of the involvement of everyone in ministry, regardless of financial constraints or the presence or absence of ordained clergy. This idea has many labels: the priesthood of all believers, the ministry of all the baptised, every-member ministry, lay ministry and the ministry of lay people. The case for the ministry of lay people is not argued here; nor do we delve into the various models by which ordained ministry continues to operate in such circumstances. We assume that, in rural churches, lay ministry is a given.

All the material in this book is for everyone involved with rural churches, including external training providers. In order to resource the ministry of lay people, clergy may first need to be resourced and assisted to develop new ways of working, acting as facilitators or *animateurs* for their congregations.¹

However, not every rural church or group of churches welcomes the ministry of lay people. Traditional expectations often reinforce a model of church life in which clergy do the ministry and the congregation receive it. Both clergy and congregation can easily end up colluding with this approach. Alternatively, congregations may see themselves, at least, as 'helping out' or carrying out tasks delegated to them. In other places there is a real desire to develop a shared approach to mission and ministry, with a focus on teamwork

and the development of the ministry of lay people.

For some, rural ministry will simply be shorthand for ministering in a rural situation and will be seen as not much different from forms of ministry elsewhere. This is not the case, as there are some very important characteristics of Christian ministry and mission in rural areas that are either absent from or much less prominent in the suburbs or cities.

The impact of rural situations

Rural churches and rural communities are different from those elsewhere. Small populations, the absence of public services, and travel distances and times all make a difference. Although many concepts and resources do not translate for use in rural churches, some do, others do with adaptation, and some initiatives and projects are ideally suited. There are also opportunities for ministry and mission that are not found in towns and cities.

While, overall, the culture of rural churches may be more conservative than in large towns and cities, the countryside is not a single homogeneous area. Every community and landscape area is different, and there is no single type of rural church, congregation or ministry. The examples, illustrations and resources in this book emerge from a very wide range of rural contexts. The issues facing people and the churches or chapels that serve them will be quite different in a string of isolated upland hamlets, a market town and a rural community that largely houses commuters.

Research carried out by the ARC² shows the impact of a rural location or background on the provision of training courses and the relevance of resources. Issues of concern include the content of courses and materials, which often

does not fulfil the needs, whether practical or theoretical, of rural congregations. Some resources may have irrelevant content or make assumptions that are not relevant to the situations of small or isolated rural churches or communities. For example, a Methodist District promoted a discipleship programme but found that participation by their rural congregations dropped off sharply as all the stories and examples in the course were based on urban or suburban situations. Frequently, churches of all denominations provide training only in centralised locations, ignoring distance and difficulties of travel. However, training provided at a more local level may struggle to create a critical mass of participants.

Types of resourcing

There is a wide variety of materials highlighted in this book, accompanied by case studies to illustrate how the materials might be used. This approach is intended to act as a catalyst for you to try things in your own churches and communities, adapting as necessary. Many of the stories in this book, unless otherwise indicated, have either been published in the ARC's *Country Way* magazine or can also be found on our website. However, it has become increasingly obvious that equipping rural congregations takes more than designing or providing appropriate resources or training materials. It starts with preparing the congregation for involvement in all aspects of church and community life, and each part of this process points to areas where an ordained minister can have a unique and vital role.

Envisioning

This is the starting point—sharing the idea with congregation members. Envisioning will be a scary concept for many but exciting for others. It will involve exploring the theology of the whole people of God, the different gifts that people have and the skills that can be used for the kingdom of God. This might be done through a sermon series, special group meetings or services, a Lent or Bible study group, or time taken over a cup of tea after a service to get people talking. Consultation and listening are key parts of the process, as are learning from experiences elsewhere and allaying some of the fears. Robert Warren’s material contained in *Developing Healthy Churches*³ may be helpful.

Enabling

What gifts, skills and ideas are present in the congregations? Do some people want to explore vocations for service in the church, the local community or the world? Resources such as *Your Shape for God’s Service*, prepared by the Diocese of Carlisle for use in small rural churches, help people explore their gifts and skills and their vocations to a wide range of roles and responsibilities. This resource helps people to understand the unique shape in which God has made them and how he might want to use them, which involves looking at:

- **Spiritual gifts** (God’s unique gifts to you)
- **Heart’s desire** (what motivates and excites you)
- **Abilities** (your talents, knowledge and skills)
- **Personality** (your character, qualities and strengths)
- **Experiences** (what you have gained from your life experiences)

The 'enabling' phase also requires some permission-giving, as well as encouragement to recognise that a broad range of gifts and skills is needed and that there will be many opportunities for them to be developed. It is important that roles that may appear to be trivial (for example, making refreshments) are valued and seen as an equally significant—indeed, vital—part of ministry.

Equipping

Equipping is about encouraging, providing training where needed, and offering ongoing support, mentoring and proper supervision. It should also include regular reviews of what is happening with both teams and individuals, depending on their task and role. This approach requires a significant investment of time and expertise that may well need to be drawn from several different people, not just the minister. However, one of the benefits of a multi-church group is that small numbers from each congregation may be brought together, even if the individuals work only in their own church rather than across the whole group.

Experience shows that growing ownership of lay ministry by rural congregations goes hand-in-hand with the development of appropriate mission within these same rural churches and the communities they serve.

Mission

What rural multi-church groups and individual churches and chapels have in their favour, among many things, is the potential to thrive. They offer a sense of rootedness and place of belonging in a changing context and in difficult social and world situations. The flipside of this is, of course, demonstrated by the reluctance of some members of rural

congregations to travel to worship elsewhere. However, this rootedness, often shown in a commitment to the church building, offers a starting point for engagement and a foundation on which to extend and deepen relationships.

Rural churches can be good at mission. Rural congregations can have mission at their heart when the right conditions are created for that mission to start and be sustained. The key features that contribute to those conditions include the various roles of many congregation members who wear multiple ‘hats’ in a range of community activities and events; the fuzzy edges of many congregations; the experience of knowing and being known by everyone in rural communities (for good and for ill); and a culture of envisioning, enabling and equipping. These features are also a starting point for community engagement and a building block for extending and deepening relationships—personal, corporate and community. They form the basis for initiating and developing lay leadership, which then contributes to mission, ministry and evangelism.

One of the most important roles for churches in villages is to support the work of regular congregation members, where God has placed them in the world, to help them to carry faith with them in deed and word.

Many of the stories and examples in the following chapters are taken from situations where multiple churches are grouped together. This situation strongly influences the background to decisions that have been taken, resources and people that are available, and the location and timing of events.

One thing that emerges in many stories involving multiple rural churches is the necessity of working together. Partnership is essential and can be put into practice between

neighbouring churches or groups of churches of the same denomination, or on an ecumenical basis, often in a market town or across a large geographical area. In some cases, partnership begins simply because one congregation alone cannot create sufficient critical mass to set up an event or activity. In other areas, it is more intentional or stems from a recognition of the reality that things are better done together.

How to use this book

This is not the first word in rural mission and ministry; nor will it be the last. It is intended as a guide to some of the main aspects of mission and ministry in rural communities, providing details of relevant resources and approaches, case studies and ideas. It is intended to be used in conjunction with the ARC website (www.germinate.net). It is relevant for members of rural congregations, lay church leaders, ordained ministers, training officers, advisers on vocation and selection, and senior staff.

This book has been written mostly by Simon Martin, as Training and Resources Officer for the ARC, over a period of two years between 2012 and the beginning of 2014. We are extremely grateful to Revd Caroline Hewlett, Rona Orme and Becky Payne for their significant contributions in writing the three chapters on worship, children and young people and church buildings.

Notes

- 1 For example, see David Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry* (SCM Press, 2011) or Robin Greenwood, *Being Church: The formation of Christian community* (SPCK, 2013).
- 2 Simon Martin, *Resourcing and Training for the Rural Church* (Arthur Rank Centre, 2011).
- 3 Robert Warren, *Developing Healthy Churches: Returning to the heart of mission and ministry* (Church House Publishing, 2012).

Mission in rural contexts

Simon Martin

When rural congregations discuss mission, it is often assumed that they mean attracting non-churchgoers to come to regular worship. While this remains important, the move from not attending church to a regular commitment may be a journey of many years. Most British citizens now have little knowledge of Christian basics, the Bible and church life. There is also a generation gap in many congregations, whether they are in rural areas or not. So this chapter focuses on how Christian values and principles are expressed by rural congregations and experienced in wider society.

Those who attend church are often deeply involved in different aspects of rural community life, providing leadership, inspiration and encouragement. It would be possible to identify a wide range of organisations that are supported, organised and led by members of rural congregations. As an example, in one Warwickshire village the carnival, educational foundation, school governors, footpath group, environment group, Neighbourhood Watch, parish council, Women's Institute, Scout groups and Brownies—to name but ten activities—would not function without the involvement of members of the local churches. Similar lists could no doubt be produced for most rural communities. In such places, this deep involvement and activity makes the boundaries between congregation and community very blurred.

In some places, church and community will be so deeply integrated that they are almost synonymous with each other;

elsewhere there may be good overlaps and links, and in other places there may be a complete disconnection between congregation and community, with the church simply being yet another group existing only for itself.

An Anglican curate talks of visits made during a study trip in the north-east of England.

The last visit we made was to the conversion of a small workhouse in a remote village. Here, a committed parish priest had worked for years, building connections and networks of investors, taking on a small row of shops, funding some affordable housing, and now a beautiful community centre, which housed the library, a tourist information centre, meeting rooms, and offices available for rent. And I reflected on the challenge—to make it clear why Christians try to do this sort of thing, building and supporting communities—because if it isn't to share 'the knowledge and love of God and of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord', then why do we do it?

Motivation

Why do Christians get involved in rural community events and organisations? *Faith in Rural Communities*¹ looked at the contributions of rural church congregations to the social capital and vibrancy of rural communities. This research explored the reasons why Christians got involved in community life.

- Some were clear about the contribution they brought as a person of faith. Regular prayer and worship provided the basis for right living, care for others, trusting relationships and a willingness to forgive and accept forgiveness. All these were vital ingredients in establishing healthy communities, and they derived from paying attention to the spiritual dimension of life.

- Others expressed a clear motivational link between faith and action. Their behaviour was a practical and visible outworking, in private and public life, of their personal faith. People of faith wanted to show the ‘love, concern and acceptance that the church ought to show’.²
- Others identified a social obligation, encouraged by a shortage of willing volunteers.
- The idea of an active faith in the community set the context for the outworking of faith—as a contributor to social well-being, both economic and community based, rather than being solely concerned for the building up of the church.
- Others focused on voluntary and community activity, with a strong feeling that organisations like the church need to be involved to bring people together and make things happen.
- There were some who found it hard to identify the source of their motivation: ‘This is just part of life,’ they suggested.³
- Many revealed overlapping motivations, plus ‘issues of justice, which as Christians we really ought to be fighting for, all the time’.⁴

Similar research⁵ into the social involvement of local churches in the Oxford area revealed that a number of people outside the church, themselves engaged in community activities, often had a clearer sense of what motivated churchgoers to get involved than the churchgoers themselves. It was ‘because they have faith’, and the people outside the church were neither surprised nor put off by this.

Research by the Institute of Volunteering Research⁶ suggests that, along with age, gender and employment status, faith is an important factor in leading some to volunteer. In

other research on volunteering in rural Scotland,⁷ a similar pattern emerged, showing a much higher level of voluntary activity than in urban areas. Churchgoing is identified as one of four key markers for volunteering and community involvement. Of course, there are many people who make vital contributions to their rural communities who do not share the faith of churchgoers. Yet it is important to remember that, in many cases, the networks and organisations that contribute to rural community vibrancy are shared by both non-churchgoers and people of faith together.

Nevertheless, volunteers who are Christians can, and often do, add a distinctive presence and contribution to their community and activities. These added values can be either indirect, through community projects, events, organisations and presence, or direct, through church projects and outreach activities. Those who are involved in their local church can help bring 'salt, light and yeast' to the heart of rural community life (see Matthew 5:13–16; Luke 13:20–21). So, at the very least, congregation members need to be equipped to be effective Christians where God has placed them in the world. This equipping is particularly important for those members of rural congregations who are unable or unwilling to acknowledge the importance of their faith in what they do. Some congregation members will be surprised to know that they are carrying out mission in their everyday lives, in an unconscious and unintentional way.

It is a very valuable exercise to identify the groups and activities in which congregation members take part, and the professional roles or areas of responsibility that they hold. It is then important to continue to pray for these groups, activities and roles on a regular basis, as part of public worship.

Where does mission take place?

This question is partially answered by the experience of a rector from a geographically dispersed rural multi-parish benefice in the West Midlands.

I recognise that many of our core parishioners are fully part of the daily mission of the church just by being so involved in their communities: meals on wheels, visiting the sick or housebound, local transport rota, volunteer-working in the post office, reading assistance in the primary school, after-school clubs, the local environmental group, running a Fairtrade stall. I think telling them to get explicitly involved in some centrally defined version of mission will draw them away from this, and give them the message that official church stuff is more important than what they are already doing. I would rather reinforce these things done locally than adopt external programmes, even when provided by [the diocese]. Of course, the trick is to help them see that what they are already doing is part of the overall mission of the local church. That isn't so easy!

Volunteering within the community, while not the same as intentional mission, may well be closely linked to it, since many of the activities are indeed firmly encompassed within a broad understanding of mission that includes loving service, pastoral care and evangelism. Additionally, in many cases the motivation of the individuals is derived from either their personal faith or what they believe is expected of the local church and Christians as a whole.

Robert Warren helpfully outlines a threefold pattern for the way in which local churches and their members engage in mission.⁸

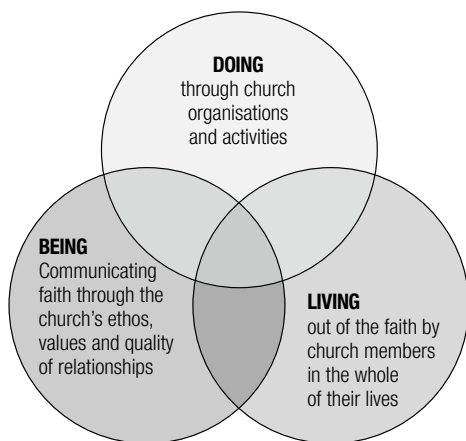


FIG: 'THE BIGGER PICTURE' FROM *DEVELOPING HEALTHY CHURCHES* BY ROBERT WARREN

This highlights some significant issues regarding mission in the local rural church:

- There are recognisable differences between explicit (Doing) and implicit (Living and Being) engagement.
- Formal, explicit church events and activities (Doing) are important, but may be of limited relevance for small congregations, large numbers of churches grouped together and dispersed communities (like many in rural situations).
- The informal contributions of the lives (Living) and relationships (Being) of churchgoers are extremely significant for effective mission.

Warren explains:

Smaller, often rural, churches may be richly involved in Christian mission without setting up a single organisation...

*Not only do they not have the resources to run things such as luncheon clubs for the elderly, but it would be counter-productive to do so. Their role, rather, is to join with the village groups running such activities. In these situations the church is not called to be **light** (with its own visible structures) but rather **leaven** (hidden within local activities). However, this call to be leaven is not just 'a nice picture', it is a serious piece of work.⁹*

As in the West Midlands rector's story earlier, the church does not need to organise, or even sanction, everything in which local church members get involved for it to be real mission. But, again as noted in the same story, the local church may have to work hard to help these individuals recognise their activities as real mission and, just as importantly, to affirm and support them in what they do. In fact, many local churches themselves may fail to recognise the individuals' engagement as mission. This is illustrated by the common situation where congregation members are prayed for in relation to their explicit church activities (for example, children's activity leaders, church officers, musicians) but not for their engagements outside the church building, such as their work or voluntary activities. Among other things, this sends a subliminal message that activities outside church are not so important to the life, ministry and mission of the local church.

Why does this happen? From the perspective of the church, the primary reason is likely to be that habit, tradition or expectation limits the recognition of 'mission' to what the church has explicitly set up or sanctioned. There is a widespread tendency to see a church only in organisational terms, through its internal or external activities or events. Churches are often more focused on providing or creating

mission than on recognising it and affirming it where it is already taking place. There are theological elements that lie behind such attitudes—not least a threefold loss:

- loss of vision that this is God’s mission
- loss of recognition that, in mission, God’s people are not so much sent out from the church as called to join where God is already present and active
- loss of understanding of the dimensions of God’s kingdom—overlapping with all of creation, and recognisable everywhere that divine norms and priorities are evident, regardless of who is actually responsible

From the perspective of individual churchgoers engaging in these missional situations, the reasons probably also revolve around habit, tradition and expectation.

- If congregation members have not had their activities recognised and affirmed as mission by the church, they are unlikely to appreciate that these are an integral and vital part of the mission of their local church.
- Likewise, if the different aspects of mission, whole-life faith and discipleship have not been explored as part of worship or in small groups, congregation members are unlikely to see what they do as God’s work or as an outworking of their own faith.

For some rural churches there is an important gap to be bridged from church-centred perceptions of mission to recognition, affirmation and support for implicit mission. Bridging this gap would encourage both the church and the individuals involved. It might also help individuals to think through the purposes of their involvement and, as a result, be

more intentional regarding mission. For example, intentional involvement might encourage a greater role in hospitality, overt prayer for those in need or reconciliation.

This bridging could be started by encouraging all church members to participate in learning about the Five Marks of Mission¹⁰ and about whole-life faith and discipleship. Perhaps key to this process is the provision of an opportunity for ordinary church members to recognise their current activities as valued by the church and as a genuine part of God's activity.

Stories about other people and congregations engaged in implicit mission will help to model what being a missional congregation is all about. This is one step removed from having to reflect directly on personal experience, which can be uncomfortable for some. Permanent changes of attitude, by individuals and by a congregation as a whole, generally come only through encouraging people to ask questions and discuss all aspects of mission with each other. Small, informal groups are usually the best context for this, and there are good materials (detailed towards the end of this chapter) that can catalyse questions and discussions about mission.

What is the rural church good at?

The Five Marks of Mission are:

- to proclaim the good news of the kingdom: **tell**
- to teach, baptise and nurture new believers: **teach**
- to respond to human need by loving service: **tend**
- to seek to transform the unjust structures of society, challenge violence of every kind, and pursue peace and reconciliation: **transform**

- to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth: **treasure**

There are two differing views about rural churches and mission. The first view sees only small congregations, elderly worshippers, old and deteriorating buildings, growing financial burdens and decreasing numbers of ordained clergy caring for increasing numbers of churches. It concludes that rural churches are poorly placed to engage in explicit, organised, effective mission. The second view recognises that these are very real issues but affirms that the rural church is actually good at mission—or it can be if it makes use of the talents and opportunities that are already present.

Mission is possible in the countryside, where there is recognition of the skills and resources actually available—people, experience, buildings, land, schools and even whole communities. This mission is often implicit and without formal church organisation; at least, it starts as such. Mission in the countryside is primarily about ‘living’ and ‘being’ first and foremost, with ‘doing’ as the third part of the mix. Showing and sharing what mission activity looks like can attract those on the edge of or outside the worshipping community.

Looking at the Five Marks summarising the mission of the church, we can draw several general conclusions about mission in rural churches.

- Rural churches are probably best at *tending*—responding to human need by loving service.
- There has been good work done in many rural churches in *teaching*, especially in terms of baptising and nurturing new believers, often in quite low-key and localised ways. Perhaps less successful is the involvement in continuing

faith development for those with lengthier experiences of faith.

- Some rural churches have engaged creatively and meaningfully with *treasuring*—striving to safeguard the integrity of creation, often linked with agricultural issues and climate change.
- While there are some great rural examples of *telling* the good news of the kingdom and seeking to *transform* the unjust structures of society, these marks can be more challenging for many rural churches, especially (but not exclusively) the very small ones.

Knowing your context

Michael Langrish, writing in *Changing Rural Life*,¹¹ stresses that a church should be firmly rooted in the particular and the local, literally embodying God’s mission and the scriptural story in specific places.

In her book *The Word in Place*, Louise Lawrence describes research she undertook with five different groups of people: residents of a rural village, inner-city residents, those living in a fishing village, people who are deaf, and ordained clergy. All were invited to read and reflect on the same scriptural passage. She notes:

*While the same biblical stories were encountered by each group, the wisdom drawn from these texts in the respective contexts was also very different... The rural village group... consisted of both church attendees and non-attendees. The exchange between these individuals throughout the process brought greater mutual understanding.*¹²

From such reflections several important conclusions can be drawn.

- Each local church needs to learn to describe and understand its cultural context.
- This context is not just the physical locality but includes the ethos, patterns and values of society.
- The local church and its members do not know everything about their own community; learning about their context will include listening to people outside the church.
- Learning about its context may not be an easy exercise for the local church. Many rural communities are in a state of flux, and their dynamics are often deep and unspoken. Learning is best done from inside a rural community, as Langrish recognises: 'many rural congregations are at the core of the local social fabric', which provides vital inside knowledge.

Less explicitly, we can also conclude that the church has to know itself, its strengths and weaknesses, and the threats and opportunities it faces. It is also important that rural churches perceive themselves accurately. As the saying goes, 'a tangerine is not a failed orange'! This illustrates the often neglected truth that small rural churches are not failed larger ones. It serves as an important reminder that the local context is of crucial importance for appropriate and successful mission. It also serves to highlight that this difference of context means that small rural churches cannot, and should not, attempt to mimic all the activities, programmes and approaches of their larger suburban counterparts.

Mission Action Planning (MAP) is being used increasingly to help churches understand their context, the opportuni-

ties it presents and the extent of their own resources. It is essentially a tool to prepare local churches for structured and intentional mission as part of larger initiatives in mission run by a diocese or district. Although the preparation work for MAP may seem daunting, especially for very small congregations, there are considerable benefits for rural churches and groups of rural churches in using MAP, especially when they work together. These include:

- the ability to review current church activities honestly and evaluate their suitability for the congregation and wider community
- assisting congregations to identify opportunities, start new initiatives (and stop others) and understand the resources available
- improve communication within the congregation and wider community
- provide a focus to help churches think about and plan for the future

From the perspective of many rural churches, though, MAP can have some drawbacks.

- It is not particularly well-suited to small churches with few active members who choose to work by themselves, and it does not always take into consideration that the MAP may be undertaken by a group of churches with shared ordained leadership.
- It can overlook the significance and extent of the implicit mission already being done by church members, which, as we have already seen, is one of the strengths of many rural churches.

- It can neglect the important element of partnership (with other churches as well as non-religious organisations and local groups) that is crucial for success or even survival in many rural communities.

The Arthur Rank Centre (ARC) has produced a bespoke toolkit to help any rural church or group of churches to make the most of their opportunities and strengths and to address some of their weaknesses. *Equipping for Rural Mission* (available at www.germinate.net/go/profiling) is a simple, flexible, free resource designed to be used by a small church or group of churches over a few sessions. The toolkit takes you through a straightforward process which includes:

- appreciating your church(es)—accurately assessing your own resources, including the gifts and skills of the congregation(s)
- discovering and recognising what you are already doing
- investigating and understanding what your communities are like and discovering what they think and expect
- looking at what is already being done by others, and how you might join in, or investigating how you might start something new in partnership with others
- working out what you are realistically able to do and what is most appropriate in engaging with your communities
- reflecting and making decisions about what might be started and what might need to be stopped

A churchwarden from one group of rural parishes in Derbyshire who used this toolkit reported:

It wasn't like anything we'd ever used before. To start with, we actually had to get out and do some finding out and talking to people instead of just sitting in meetings listening to experts talking! We discovered some very interesting things about our villages that we hadn't realised, especially about what people thought of the church (which wasn't always encouraging). But what was really encouraging was learning about all the little things that church folk have been doing in their own patches.

We've had our feedback and reflection day and we've decided where we can start doing some new things together; we've got more gifts and better skills than most of us realised. So we want to start a Messy Church, to be run between four of our six churches, and we hope to start fortnightly second-hand or local produce stalls alongside a children's activity, coffee and bacon baps in [the biggest village]. It has been harder realising that we might need to stop some activities so that we can channel our energy into similar things being done better by others.

The power of story

Stories are as important to people in the church as elsewhere. Rural congregations and their leaders can be greatly encouraged by hearing stories of how people like them have done things elsewhere. There are many ways in which stories can be shared. When this happens, there are often numerous nodding heads and murmurs of recognition. What is surprising, though, is that such apparently widespread recognition seldom finds its way into the resourcing of local churches. Both research and experience reveal that the major reason for this is lack of knowledge about where good stories can be found, often compounded by a lack of avenues to distribute or share helpful stories.

Swap shop

Revd Claire Lording talks about the Ludlow Deanery Swap Shop, which emerged from a deanery discussion about rural mission. They asked the question, ‘How do we, as church, engage with our rural communities in a meaningful way?’

We realised that we all approached this task in different ways and that within the deanery there was a wealth of experience and expertise. So we agreed to put on an event that would enable every parish of the deanery to come together to celebrate what they do in their context and to share their good practice with the rest of the deanery. The aim was to affirm parishes in what they already do, to encourage them to see what other parishes were doing, and to enable mutual learning.

Who did we want to invite and involve? Our diocese has a clear strategy for promoting Mission Action Planning and wants to enable PCCs to be part of this process, so that they, along with the whole church community and the wider community, can think about what their hopes are for the future, and how their priorities can best reflect God’s priorities. So early on it was agreed that the Swap Shop would primarily be for PCC members, the idea being that they could not only come along and share what they do but could learn from the experiences of other PCCs and parishes, which would hopefully feed into their own Mission Action Planning. The Swap Shop would also provide an opportunity for parishes to evaluate how their activity corresponded with the Marks of Mission.

The day also provided a good opportunity for the deanery to learn together, and a small number of workshops were organised. The workshops looked at different aspects of mission, including exploring the talents to be found in the parishes, and looking at mission with young people.

At the Swap Shop itself, the hall buzzed with activity and conversation the whole day long. Many of the PCCs from the deanery had gone to a lot of trouble to be involved and there was a real sense of pride in what they were

offering to the rest of the deanery. Among all the laptops, display boards of every size, photos and hands-on resources, offerings included a Traidcraft stall, 'Faith in the Pub', coffee mornings in various styles (including fresh bacon rolls on market day), welcome packs, adult Christian learning, Mothers' Union, a parents' and toddlers' group, Messy Church, the 'Off the Street' youth club, a link with Maramba in Tanzania, links with campers on holiday, family services, Godly Play, music and prayer, links with a local prison craft club, and Caring for God's Acre.¹³

The Swap Shop achieved its objective, in that it brought the deanery together to celebrate all that we do and all that we are. It also encouraged and supported the people and parishes of the deanery in working together to share God's kingdom with all. Many of those who came to the Swap Shop left with notebooks and heads full of ideas that they wanted to try out in their parishes. There was definitely a buzz about mission that morning and we hope that this will continue in the parishes of the deanery.

Other ways of sharing stories

Not every rural PCC or group of rural churches has opportunities to share face-to-face in this way, and, when such swapping of stories and ideas does take place, it tends to be within a relatively limited geographical area or a related group, such as a single Anglican deanery. On top of this, if we are honest, there is little face-to-face sharing of stories across denominational boundaries.

Nevertheless, there are ways to encounter examples of good practice elsewhere, such as through denominational or Churches Together publications, web-based collections of stories or online forums.

***Country Way* magazine**

Prominent among these publications is the magazine *Country Way*, produced by the ARC. Every issue is replete with good stories from rural congregations across the country, in numerous contexts and from a variety of denominations and traditions.

A retired teacher in Yorkshire writes of how she has been encouraged to 'help get a few things going' having discovered *Country Way*.

I read about a Harvest Supper and shared the story with a few others in the chapel, and we decided that we'd try to organise one. The whole congregation and lots of others in the village got stuck in; local farmers and the shopkeeper provided good food; we got a (clean) barn for nothing; we roped in any 'local talent' we had for entertainment. On the night we had a Harvest Thanksgiving service with the local brass band in the barn, followed by a supper accompanied by a talent show, to which we got nearly 250 people—which is most of the village! Next on the list is a church-organised Big Cream Tea (again with a brass band—we are from Yorkshire, after all) and an outdoor service afterwards. This idea was also sparked by an article in *Country Way*. Maybe we can break the 300 mark if we can get visitors from outside to come as well.

Rural stories online

The ARC has a growing collection of stories focused on explicit mission: *Stories of Rural Hope*. The online 'Library of Rural Good Practice' contains pieces that provide greater depth and more detail. A significant proportion of the content focuses on community-based mission and evangelism, often also involving discipleship and nurture. Quite a few of these examples of good practice combine a story with discussion

and evaluation of a particular resource, tool or approach from the rural perspective.

A Ministry Area Leader from the Church in Wales shares how she benefited from an online evaluation from the ARC.

We've got eleven tiny churches in the outlying villages and bigger 'hub' churches in our two small towns. We're going to be learning to work together, and I'm looking seriously at ways of using the positive side of being small to encourage and develop all the church members. In particular we need something that helps small churches to be realistic about mission and ministry. Your resource evaluating the Scottish Episcopal Church's 'Welcoming Small Congregations' is really helpful as it shows that there is something already out there that others have used, which works—and our situations in rural Wales and rural Scotland aren't so different. So we've got their book of stories, which tells things as they really are, and, best of all, you've pointed out where we can get workbook material to download for ourselves. I'm planning to use this with the full Ministry Area Team when it is properly functioning.

It is important to note how such stories are best used. They are not intended to be slavishly copied. As discussed earlier, context is vital and no two rural churches or communities are identical. The stories can inspire, encourage and enthuse; they can be catalysts or stepping-stones for trying something new in your own location with judicious tweaking and a little Spirit-anointed imagination.

With the growing availability of free and easy-to-use multimedia tools on the web, increasing numbers of people are creating and sharing video clips and audio files online. Some of these are formal parts of larger web-based resources, good examples being CPAS and Fresh Expressions, and some of the material is specifically rural.

Interactive sharing of stories

It is also worth considering whether it might be helpful to share things that are being done in your own churches with others. There are a number of locations where you can share stories of rural mission or ministry. For some, like the ARC publications and web-based libraries already mentioned, you can make contact and send in material or ideas; these will then be made widely available in the most suitable way.

There are other web forums where you can add your own stories, ask questions or introduce a topic of conversation, open your material up for comments from other rural church practitioners, and benefit from others who have done the same. Many of these use some form of social media, usually a Facebook page or group or a blog. Some Facebook groups worth looking at include 'Renewing the Rural Church', 'Arthur Rank Centre', 'Country Way', 'Who Let The Dads Out?' and 'Messy Church—BRF'.

The following resources may be helpful.

- *Country Way*:
www.countryway.org.uk
- Resources for rural communities:
www.germinate.net/go/communities
- Library of Rural Good Practice:
www.germinate.net/go/casestudies
- Equipping for rural mission toolkit:
www.germinate.net/go/profiling
- Stories of rural HOPE:
www.germinate.net/go/hopestories
- ARC on Facebook:
www.facebook.com/arthurrankcentre

Notes

- 1 *Faith in Rural Communities: Contributions of social capital to community vibrancy* (ACORA, 2006). www.germinate.net/go/faithinruralcommunities
- 2 *Ibid.* p. 44
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 45
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 45
- 5 'Building better neighbourhoods: the contribution of faith communities to Oxordshire life' (2010): <https://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open/items/32e0943c-358f-aed4-b5ba-b65edb591304/1>
- 6 'Helping out: a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving', Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office (2007), pp. 19–20: www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/Institute-of-Volunteering-Research/Migrated-Resources/Documents/H/OTS_Helping_Out.pdf
- 7 Mike Woolvin and Alasdair Rutherford, 'Volunteering and public service reform in rural Scotland', Scottish Rural Policy Centre (2013), p. 5: www.volunteerscotland.net/media/235107/volunteering_and_public_service_reform.pdf
- 8 'The Bigger Picture' diagram, Robert Warren, *Developing Healthy Churches: Returning to the heart of mission and ministry* (Church House Publishing, 2012), p. 122
- 9 Warren, *Developing Healthy Churches*, p. 123
- 10 For more information on the Five Marks of Mission, see www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks-of-mission.aspx
- 11 Michael Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community' in J.M. Martineau, L.J. Francis and P. Francis (eds), *Changing Rural Life: A Christian response to key rural issues* (Canterbury Press, 2004), pp. 21–43
- 12 Louise J. Lawrence, *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in contemporary contexts* (SPCK, 2009), p. 136
- 13 For more information, see www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Resourcing Rural Ministry offers an in-depth exploration of the key aspects, challenges and opportunities of mission in a rural church. Relevant for ordained and lay leaders alike, the book covers subjects ranging from encouraging evangelism in a multi-church group to making best use of church buildings. Containing a wealth of real-life case studies and suggestions for follow-up, this ecumenical publication draws on the expertise and resources of the Arthur Rank Centre (ARC), which has served the spiritual and practical needs of the rural Christian community for over 40 years. This book contributes to ARC's Germinate programme of training, development and support for rural multi-church groups of all denominations.

Resourcing Rural Ministry was first developed by Simon Martin as Training and Resources Officer at the ARC. Additional chapters have been contributed by the Revd Caroline Hewlett, Rona Orme and Becky Payne and the final text has been prepared and edited by Jill Hopkinson.

This book is packed with helpful resources and background theology that will aid the rural church to be a vibrant and relevant presence in today's society.

Revd Peter Ball, Mission and Training Officer, Eastern Synod of the URC

Read these contributions and you'll be excited by a wealth of experience, insight and resource.

Rt Revd James Bell, Bishop of Ripon

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