

GENERAL SYNOD HUSTINGS FOR CLERGY QUESTION 4

A majority of the parishes in our Diocese are in rural and semi-rural areas. What is your understanding of the challenges of Rural Ministry and how would you seek to address them?

<p>BAKKER, the Revd Jane</p>	<p>I have served in two multi parish benefices in rural and semi rural settings. The experience in each was quite different. Although they share some similarities, there are many nuances within rural ministries that make it difficult to generalise.</p> <p>Personally, my own experience of the multi parish benefice model was disappointing. As clergy time and energy was spread so thinly, it seemed to be neither a satisfactory arrangement for the village, the church or the clergy team. It can work well, with strong clergy leadership, the support of dedicated lay leaders and a willing co-operation between component churches and villages.</p> <p>I am encouraged that the Faith and the Future of the Countryside Report made recommendations about training of clergy to appreciate the 'distinctive nature, demands and stresses of rural mission and ministry'. But more can be done, I feel, to enable clergy to have more flexibility in their ministry.</p> <p>Creative, pioneering models of church can work well in rural settings. There are many good examples of fresh expressions and extensions of church flourishing in rural areas. In places where amenities are limited, a well resourced church can establish itself as a centre of the community.</p>
<p>FOSTER, the Revd Gavin</p>	<p>The Church of England is uniquely placed to do rural and semi-rural mission - we already have churches in places other denominations don't reach. Rural communities are often very supportive of their local church, and many congregations are reaching very high proportions of the local community. But there are significant challenges: high-maintenance buildings (see question 1), declining clergy numbers and how to deepen the commitment and faith of the broad 'fringe'.</p> <p>Whether rural or urban, communities of committed Christians giving generously and sacrificially of their time, talents and resources can be sustainable even if they are relatively small. Our focus should be on growing passionate followers of Jesus in every context.</p>
<p>MICKLEFIELD, the Revd Andrew</p>	<p>I have served as an incumbent in a semi-rural parish - The Itchen Valley and have lived with some of the following challenges.</p> <p>A small population. This can mean less people to attend services, to take on leadership roles, people committed to a number of community projects not just church. I looked innovatively at partnerships with other community activities - sharing of skills and resource.</p> <p>A burdensome administrative/governing structure at PCC level, especially in a multi parish benefice. I am a strong advocate of the single parish system which is operational in the Itchen Valley and in Alton. A main PCC which oversees mission, outreach, evangelism, community partnership etc with small separate District Councils to focus on buildings.</p>

	<p>A number of people who are heavily committed to life and work in another context. I learnt to accept it, and transfer experiences appropriately.</p> <p>A lot of buildings to manage and maintain. I would like to see a practical yet theological buildings review happen across the Church of England.</p> <p>Lack of paid support such as an administrator, youth and children’s worker. I would look for opportunities to share with other benefices or larger parishes, or take up good volunteers. We did both.</p>
<p>NOEL, the Revd Rachel</p>	<p>Multi-parish groupings are a complexity of rural ministry, with ministers working across diverse geographical areas, supporting several different congregations and church buildings, set within a variety of communities. The organisational structures across multi-parish groups can be complex and challenging, making decision-making, budgeting and movement forward, a slow and complicated process. As ministers are typically rotating around several different churches, there isn't always the continuity of person & place, which can make pastoral awareness and care more difficult too.</p> <p>I would seek to address these challenges by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting the development of rural-ministry specific ministerial training and further education for both ordained and lay ministers, to help ministers be better equipped to lead ministry in rural settings. • Supporting the research of Canon Dr Jill Hopkinson and others, seeking to identify specific structures, approaches and models of rural ministry that support mission, ministry and growth in this environment; to help understand the training that would be helpful. • Encouraging a simplification of the legal structures, particularly around developing additional uses for existing church buildings, and forging ecumenical partnerships with other denominations. This would make it easier to bring together smaller groups in rural localities to work together in mission.
<p>NUTT, the Revd Angela</p>	<p>I served my title in a semi-rural parish and lived and worked in a village for 12 years before ordination. In my experience the challenges of rural ministry are often about clergy spread very thin, often looking after many churches, fitting in many services on a Sunday, frequently with several miles in between the churches. Congregations can be small, but deeply committed to their village or hamlet and the continued presence of a church there. Occasional offices are very key, rural communities have a sense of history and connection which brings people to the church to mark these occasions , providing fantastic Gospel opportunities but further loading the clergy. Lay empowerment in these contexts is vital for so much of the week by week running of the church communities and pastoral care, but the need for more ordained ministers is paramount too. Local Ordained Ministers are likely to be a significant answer, training those with local knowledge and connections, who have commitment and understanding of the context and enable the sacramental ministry to small rural churches to continue as well as enabling mission & growth amongst families who are seeking a more rural lifestyle.</p>

<p>PERRY, the Revd Canon William</p>	<p>My ministry has been almost entirely urban, so rather than seek to bring my own insights into rural ministry I would wish to learn from others who have a more intimate knowledge of the issues.</p>
<p>PITKIN, the Revd James</p>	<p>Living and working in rural parishes in the south west of the Diocese I see many challenges. These include:</p> <p>Poor Self-Esteem – rural churches tend to compare themselves with larger urban churches and often feel ‘second-class’. There is a danger that the people think that they can do no more than survive.</p> <p>Limited Resources – smaller congregations and, often less-wealthy congregations, struggle. Most smaller churches can accomplish much more by doing less, and doing it with excellence.</p> <p>Although there are challenges, there are strengths, which can be used to address the challenges. These strengths can attract the unchurched:</p> <p>They Offer Community – it is hard to be anonymous in a rural setting and the local church overflows the buildings into the whole of the community. Those churches that do a good job of providing a sense of community will be churches that will experience growth.</p> <p>They Provide People with an Opportunity to Serve – it is often easy to draw people in. People are interested in being involved in activities which they believe makes a difference. Smaller churches often have an advantage over larger churches in their willingness to allow people to become involved.</p>
<p>ROUCH, the Ven Dr Peter</p>	<p>Rural communities frequently exhibit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong but unfocused sense of connection with the physical church, but lack of involvement in worship does not necessarily betoken a non-existent sense of belonging. • A challenge in sustaining critical mass in the worshipping community to develop the life and mission of the church. <p>Where sustainability is in doubt, it is important to value and involve local communities in funding and management of the church building. Our churches are community assets. This implies greater flexibility in the use and development of our churches. Where no effective reality can be shaped around this, and a congregation cannot sustain itself, we should be unafraid to recognise that our physical presence may have reached its conclusion.</p> <p>Effective mission requires the planning and resourcing of church life in clusters of sufficient critical mass to prioritise effectively, and resource to what is prioritised. This is not always assisted by the existence of large numbers of PCCs within a single benefice. There is persuasive evidence that this is not serving the flourishing of the rural church, that clergy find large numbers of PCCs a drain and hindrance, and are less likely to apply for roles where this is the case.</p>

<p>RUTHERFORD, the Revd Rosalind</p>	<p>Last February General Synod received an excellent report on rural ministry, and held a very helpful debate describing both the difficulties and opportunities of rural ministry. The challenges were clear: continual reductions in the numbers of stipendiary clergy has resulted in most rural parishes being part of a multi-parish benefice leading to huge pressures on the time and energy of rural clergy. Churches are often difficult and expensive in money and time to maintain but are deeply valued by those who live in the village.</p> <p>The findings of the report were that mission is possible and successful in rural ministry when the church works with the community, builds strong relationships and responds to the local context. The boundaries between church and community are often, rightly, blurred, and developing discipleship has to take account of this. Ministry and mission in rural parishes must be the shared responsibility of clergy and laity, and training to help develop this shared ministry is vital. In particular, developing strong relationships with local schools is very more important.</p> <p>The challenge of much loved churches with tiny congregations to maintain them remains, and here Exeter diocese's creation of "Festival Churches " may prove a way forward.</p>
<p>SARGENT, the Revd Dr Benjamin</p>	<p>As a minister of a rural benefice on the edge of the New Forest, I see more opportunities than challenges here. A relatively settled population, a comparatively greater sense of community with fewer people living anonymously, a greater identification with the parish Church and, to some extent, a social conservatism which gives the Christian message the chance to be heard. An active local Church in the countryside can be more easily noticeable than an active suburban Church. The challenges are, as elsewhere, our resources: there are more opportunities than can realistically be made use of. Again, the best response is to build disciples who can see these opportunities themselves and be able to engage with them. In rural areas, where ministry is often seen to be the work of the vicar and non-Christian doors are more willing to open to the person in a dog collar, a greater degree of public accreditation and authorisation of lay people in ministry may be useful.</p>
<p>STEED, the Revd Dr Christopher</p>	<p>I speak from very recent experience of being Team Rector of nine rural parishes in North Devon. There we faced physical and structural issues such as lack of affordable housing (resulting in offspring often moving elsewhere), lack of quality jobs (making it harder to recruit clergy with a working spouse), the price of milk, lack of roads, access and the length of time to get around. Keeping beautiful churches going with small congregations was a constant headache amidst constrained resources. Added to that were issues to do with rural psyche. I have written on this. People wish to guard their way of life and react often with social conservatism while being fully IT literate. The default entity is the Parish; it was hard work trying to get people to move and attend joint services. Rationalisation is unlikely to succeed! Another barrier to ministry is that rural faith is often Old Testament in its thinking.</p> <p>Although tourism and 'incomers' have changed things hugely, farming remains a way of life. Farmers feel that policy makers do not understand how indispensable they are. Amidst rural isolation, community spirit is something to be treasured. The Church remains part of the social glue.</p>