

RURAL EVANGELISM NETWORK

This paper is an extract from our website at www.ruralevangelism.net. It is part of a series exploring issues for small churches. You will find other helpful articles within the “Knowledge Exchange” section of the website. These articles are contributed by members of the Network who seek to encourage best practice in rural evangelism through sharing their insight and experience as practitioners.

Fresh Expressions of Rural Church

In this section we will address the issues of:

- Why do things differently?
- Getting from the traditional to the new

One of the most important and searching questions we, as God’s people, should ask in any and every age, culture and context, is “How can we best cooperate with God’s mission in this place, with these people, at this time?”

Faithfully discerning the answer to that question can lead to an amazing variety of missional approaches some of which could lead to the establishment of a fresh expression of Church.

However, before asking that question there is a still more vital question to be asked and response to make which is to do with the depth to which we understand and share God’s love for His world.

Before considering models of mission, the culture of Church or patterns of ministry it is vital that we return to one of the foundational premises of our faith that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”. By re engaging with the scriptures, devoting ourselves to prayer, being open to the inspiring, empowering and searching work of the Spirit we may by the grace of God once more know His heart for those who do not yet know Him, feel something of His compassion for the broken and poor, and share His desire that “none should perish”. Identification with the love of God for His world (as imperfect and incomplete as that identification will be in us), is an essential starting place for us as individuals and for the Churches and teams we are part of, not least when we know that our current approaches are not as effective as they once were. A missional approach whether arising and formed within inherited Church or involving the establishment of a fresh expression of Church is more likely to be sustained and effective if birthed out of a sharing in the heart of our missionary God and His passion for all His creation.

That said, in a situation where it is clear that the Church is no longer effectively engaging with significant numbers of people in it’s context or the community as a whole, where it’s place in the life of the local community is marginal at best, where it’s influence towards the further establishment of the Kingdom of God is diminished and the formation of new disciples of Jesus rare, one of the possible responses is to work towards the establishment of a fresh expression of Church. This fresh expression of Church can then seek to engage with non-church people in their current culture.

The situation described above is, sadly, an accurate description of the rural church in some parts of the UK at the beginning of the 21st century. In some rural areas less than 5% of the total population are meaningfully engaged with Church in terms of being part of any worshipping community. (Assessed in Lincolnshire 2005 by asking Church leaders what the total size of their worshipping community was rather than counting Church attendance on particular Sundays or over a period of time). In many rural areas, despite the faithful witness of existing church members, involvement in Church continues to decline, chapels are closing, Anglican parishes are being added to existing multi-parish benefices and surviving congregations are diminished in numbers and increasingly

elderly. There is some evidence that some of the change is due to people attending Church less frequently rather than an absolute decline in the total number of attendees but overall there is a weakening of the influence and effectiveness of the Church in mission.

The comprehensive TEAR FUND survey of 2006 commented: *Two thirds of UK adults (66%) or 32.2 million people have no connection with church at present (or with another religion). These people are evenly divided between those who have been in the past but have since left (16 million) and those who have never been in their lives (16.2 million). This secular majority presents a major challenge to churches. Most of them - 29.3 million - are unreceptive and closed to attending church; churchgoing is simply not on their agenda.*

This picture helps us in part to answer the question “Why do things differently?” We could respond - “because as things now appear there must be more effective and sustainable ways of missional engagement in our changing rural situations”: and it may just be that God is calling us to new ways of “joining in with what He is already doing” (After John V Taylor).

Taking a closer look at some of the underlying changes in our rural culture that have led to the weakening of the Churches’ mission may help us to answer the question more fully. Some of the social trends include:

1. Migration patterns. Within the UK migration patterns have led to a net influx of older people and a loss of the young in rural areas (The “greying” of rural communities). This may be in part because of education and employment patterns coupled with relatively high house prices in attractive rural areas.
2. Changing use of Sundays: Churches that have a mostly ‘attractional’ concept of mission which relies on Sunday gatherings are losing out to sport, employment, leisure activities and the need for separated family members to make contact.
3. Changing relational networks: there is less emphasis on relationships within the local neighbourhoods and with local extended family groups (because family members are now more likely to be at a distance) and more emphasis on social networks. Social networks may be based on leisure activities, workplace, education, youth subculture etc. The “members” of these networks are often geographically dispersed but able to communicate easily at a distance through mobile phones and the Internet. (Note the popularity of web based social networks such as Face Book, My Space or Bebo). Loss of community in rural areas is compounded by the loss of schools, post offices and shops in smaller communities - the focus for relationships that these once provided has gone from many places.
4. Less knowledge of faith. We continue to think that there is background knowledge of Christianity in the general population. Whilst this may still be true for older generations it is not necessarily the case for the young (under forty probably). Only a small minority of children now hear the Christian story as involvement in Sunday schools is less than 5% and there is patchy coverage of even the basics of the faith in primary and secondary schools.

So these changes and others form another powerful answer to the question “Why do things differently” - essentially the culture we are now in is not the culture that many of our churches reflect and the gap between the two is widening. We are asking people to sacrifice precious social time to make entrance into what can be to them a culturally alien, archaic, unattractive, uncomfortable and purposeless environment.

We do need to do things differently. One way in which some Christians feel they are being led to “do things differently” is to consider establishing a fresh expression of Church. The aim is that these will arise alongside existing churches and complement rather than compete with them.

The UK Fresh Expressions initiative currently defines a fresh expression of Church as follows: A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

- It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.
- It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.

It is important to underline that whilst fresh missional approaches and projects arising from existing Churches are welcome and important, fresh expressions of Church aim to become just that - authentic, sustained and mature church - particularly established for the benefit of those who are not currently in Church at all.

So how do we get from the traditional to the new?

Like so many aspects of our faith the only place to start this journey is in prayer. We need to pray that God would enable us to share His concern for those in our communities that do not know Him. We need to repent where we have not done so.

We can ask Him for the privilege of sharing something of His compassion for and interest in the majority of the population who are not disciples of Jesus and are outside the doors of any church. We need to pray that He will give us the grace and courage to move out of a way of doing church that we find comfortable in order that others may share the life we have discovered in Jesus. We need to study again the biblical story of a God who came looking for His creation. We need to understand how we can be incarnational, visible and accessible (in culture, relationships and geography) as Jesus was on earth. We need to commit ourselves to an adventure in mission with the God of mission.

So - change begins with our hearts then continues with reshaping what we believe to be important.

We need to look at our values; the things we think are important in Church. We need to start to ask the question "what is the minimum of our current church life that we would take with us if we were starting a new Church and why?" Would we really need anything other than the presence of God, the bible and each other? Well possibly - but the important things may be generosity, hospitality, service to and re-engagement with our communities, an acceptance of cost, a focus on the extension of the Kingdom of God and a desire to see new disciples of Jesus formed. Then after that maybe we can discuss essential Church practices and non-negotiable denominational requirements - accountability is important. If we are to start something new then we may need to stop doing some things we are currently involved in - what needs to go?

We need to do some pruning to make way for new growth.

Then our vision needs to change. Again through prayer we need to seek God as to where He is at work in the community we are concerned with so that we can join in. What is He already doing? We need to listen to God and to the community we are committed to. What are its needs? Where might we make a difference? Who can we serve? What is the heart of this community? Where do most people meet? How can we engage there? Who else is already at work that we might join with? Where are the blocks to faith? What is the history of this place that may give insight as to what approach to take? Prayer may need to be focussed on asking God for the right people to come and help but this should never be an excuse for not using the resources we already have however limited.

Practicalities. There are no two rural situations that are the same and so it is important not to copy models from elsewhere but to see how God leads in your situation. There are, however, some

principles and practice in developing fresh expressions of church which we can learn from each other. There is much helpful and practical information available from the fresh expressions websites

www.freshexpressions.org.uk and www.sharetheguide.org.uk

It is also possible to download (at no cost) the mission shaped intro course from the first site above which consists of six sessions designed to be delivered weekly aimed at helping Church members understand the need for approaching Church in new ways.

There is also a 1 year part time course: mission shaped ministry designed to equip people who are planning to start a fresh expression of church. The aim is to make the course available within an hour's travel of everyone in the UK. See www.freshexpressions.org.uk for details.

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