

Fresh Expressions in Rural areas

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The following notes relate to a presentation given at a workshop on fresh expressions organised by the Congregational Federation on the 4th and 5th July 2006.

In the context of this paper the word “church” normally refers to a local gathering of Christians committed to one another in fellowship. The terms “fresh expressions” and “emerging church” are generally used interchangeably here.

“Emerging church” could of course mean something new but similar to what had preceded it, but that meaning is not expressed here.

Before going further is well worth taking a moment to consider what church actually exists for. Nowhere in scripture to read that Jesus instructed his disciples to go into all the world and establish churches. Churches came into being subsequent to and consequentially because of God’s mission or the *Missio Dei*.

Unless churches are engaged in that mission it is difficult to understand the validity of their existence. It is not so much that the Church of God has a mission, but that the God of mission has a church.

“Fresh Expressions” has become something of the “flavour of the day”. At present it is being largely driven jointly by the Church of England and the Methodist Church. Much that has been written and has appeared on their website is influenced by their respective ecclesiology. Congregationalists may need to reinterpret this for churches with congregational polity.

In the context of this paper I want to test the current conclusions of the Fresh Expressions initiative from an understanding of rural culture. I do not intend to take a censorious position regarding the Fresh Expressions movement per se. I recognise the need for fresh expressions of church that are truly congregationally ordered. I also recognise the need for fresh expressions of church in rural areas. However in a rural context we do need to consider how the need for fresh expressions relates to both opportunities and constraints. That is what I shall seek to do here.

The following statements are extracted from the fresh expressions website “Fresh expressions of church are new and different ways of being church in a changing culture. Fresh expressions of church begin where people are and make church and community there.

“Over the last 50 years society itself has changed. People move around more. They work in different places. Most of us live in cities not villages. People get to know one another now through networks of fellowship, through work colleagues, through sharing the same interests. It is no longer enough for the church simply to relate to people because of where

they live (although we'd still need the parish system). The churches need to serve the whole of society. That means relating to networks as well as to areas.

“A fresh expression of church is intended as a community or congregation which is already (or has the potential to grow into) a church in its own right. It is not intended to be a half way house or stepping stone for someone joining a Sunday morning congregation”.

While the comments quoted above may be generally true, for a significant proportion of the United Kingdom's population the wide sweeping nature of the second paragraph is one with which they would wish to take issue.

Recent analysis of the UK population has indicated that one person in six or 17 per cent of United Kingdom population lives in a rural settlement of 5000 or less. Certainly in communities of 2000 or less there remains a strong sense of identity with the place and the people where they live. This would be true even among incomers. Of course, many of them are also involved in the kind of networks referred to above, but there remains an unquestionable need for a visible expression of the Kingdom of God within almost every rural settlement.

There is no such thing as a typical village. Some villages vary enormously because of a number of different factors. The Right Reverend Dr. Anthony Russell, when he was Director of the Arthur Rank Centre, developed a proximity model in an attempt to understand social traits. A number of concentric circles spread out from an urban conurbation.

The first circle closest to the conurbation he defined as urban shadow. The next circle, moving outwards, he defined as accessible countryside.

The next he defined as less accessible. The finest area he defined as remote rural.

The further out from the centre the more people behaved in ways and held values distinct from their urban cousins.

I developed a different model based on the socio-economic history of the community. Some villages have existed for centuries and developed around an agricultural or fishing industry. Other villages were established during the 19th and early part the 20th Century as industrial villages built around a mineral resource or some other important asset. Some villages have developed into commuter or dormitory villages. Still other villages are clearly affected by tourism. New villages have been recently developed that can only be described as suburbia in the countryside.

Both Russell's model and mine need to be considered together, but even these do not give the total picture. The nature of any rural settlement is also determined partly by the size of the local population and the morphology of the settlement. Some villages are relatively compact and may be built around a village green; other villages are ribbon development stretched along a road. The life of the community will also be determined by the mix of people groups living there. While Britain's villages are not multi-ethnic, and indeed, ethnic minorities are generally at rarity, the villages are multicultural. Here are the key groups:

Indigenous villagers may still be found living in rural settlements but that often and marginalized and may only be discovered on some of the council housing estates.

There are still historic land owners dwelling in large properties passed on of the many generations.

There are also new land owners drawn from among pop stars, football stars and the like.

Although farming industry is not employ great numbers the presence of farmers and farm workers are still quite significant.

Many people from towns and cities have moved into the countryside upon retirement (although many the back to the town for various reasons after a few years) us.

Having a rural address, denies property with a paddock and are still something which many of the more affluent and socially aspiring again for. There are also a significant number of people who have managed to acquire a run-down cottage with a large piece of land where they can live out their aspiration for a bit more natural lifestyle, raising chicken growing vegetables etc.

All this said, they are major influences across all of these people groups which have caused rural communities to become increasingly suburbanised.

THE NEED FOR FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH

The 2001 Census revealed that 70% of people in the UK identify themselves as Christian. But of these, research suggests that 10% may attend church at least once a month, and another 10% at least once a year. 40% are described as de-churched (Used to come but no more!). The remaining 40% have never been to church.

Roughly half the de-churched might come back and current evangelism strategies seem aimed at these and those who attend some time. This leaves 60% being largely neglected.

Church, as it is usually experienced does not appeal to at least 60% of the population either because of experience or because of the perceived image. The UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 2001/2001 No.2 reveals the following decline in the percentage of UK children attending Sunday School.

While church attendance in rural communities is higher than in urban situations, there has been marked steady decline as people have voted with their feet. Inherited patterns of church have little or no appeal to the majority of the rural population and as a vehicle for evangelism and mission it is clearly failing.

THE LIMITS ON OPPORTUNITY AND MAJOR CONSTRAINTS

Opportunity clearly exists where effective methods can be found to reach the un-churched and de-churched sections of the community. The new villagers (now in the majority), rather than the established villagers, probably offer the greatest potential to engage with fresh expressions of church. But the opportunity is constrained.

The churches that are there already.

Despite decline most villages still have their own Parish Church, and there is a strong tie between the wider village community and the church. It belongs to them. They may not attend or may attend infrequently but anything that looks like competition or threatens its future can awaken hostility from within the community. In England around 63% of rural churches are Anglican.

In the main, Parish Churches are defined as “community churches” in the sense that they are here for and are seen to belong to the whole community. They are strongly tied to civil parish life, and no one is “defined” as being especially religious by attending.

Non-conformist churches in rural areas, of which the Methodist Church accounts for 26% of English rural churches, are sometimes seen as “belonging” but more often are tolerated, and not seen as the “proper church”. Baptists come in at 5% and Congregational churches are now less than 1% where once they were a major presence.

Non-conformist or Free Churches are usually seen as “gathered churches” and as a sect. The congregation is a faith community. Ties with the wider village life are looser, and regular attending such a church makes a clear statement about a person and their faith. Coming for a first time is a challenge as it is likely to be general village gossip within 24 hours. Such churches can appear exclusive. Of course, it is possible to be a combination of both the community and gathered models.

The pattern of denominational representation varies around the country.

In Scotland the Presbyterian Church of Scotland is at least as dominant as the Church of England is in England. In Wales there is slightly less dominance from the Church in Wales. Commencing a fresh expression is very likely to be seen as serious criticism of what is there already. It is likely to be resisted.

Some work by sociologists identified that rural people tend to be cautious, conservative, insular, suspicious of anything and anyone who does not “belong”, intransigent, unimaginative, and diffident. While the march of cultural sub-urbanisation may be eroding these traits in many villages they are still evident, sometimes among incomers too. Fresh expressions of church are far less likely to be embraced because of some of these traits.

It is interesting to note that in England the Salvation Army, Pentecostal churches, Brethren churches, strongly Anglo-Catholic churches, and strongly Charismatic churches tend to be less likely to be found. This may well indicate that very distinctive styles have difficulty taking root in rural communities.

Disengagement with community.

In the past there have been churches that experienced charismatic renewal, among other factors, which subsequently led to marked growth. However, the growth almost always came from people outside the community in which the church was situated. But as the presence of outsiders increases the church steadily becomes disengaged with the community in which it is situated, often resulting with it becoming a cause of some kind wholly unrelated and unable to properly communicate with the local residents. Since it is

mission and evangelism that are usually intended to be the aims for this affect is entirely counter-productive.

Any fresh expression of church in a rural situation needs to be of the community if it is to be for the community.

A matter of scale

Those engaging with rural churches generally would not expect much more than 5% to attend church regularly (i.e. at least once a month). Some will commute out of the village to a church of their choice. If there is a Parish church and a Congregational church in a village then that 5% will have to be divided three ways.

Quite typically 3% will go to the Parish Church. This leaves 1% for the Congregational church and 1% commuting. Attempts to establish a fresh expression of church alongside what already exists needs to take this on board, though we would all want to raise our horizons. Some fresh expressions of church may be focused on specific people groups in a village. This is likely to accentuate the difficulties of scale.

OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

I have pointed out the multi-cultural nature of rural communities, the lack of anonymity, and limitations of size. Church leaders and strategists, who have only an urban mind-set, would easily fall into the trap as seeing all these things as a problem. But like many problems they can be viewed as advantages.

Tangerines are not small oranges, and small village churches are different from large town and city churches. But celebration in a small intimate setting can be as enjoyable as a great party. Some may suggest they can be more enjoyable, and many prefer tangerines to oranges.

Some of the advantages of worship in a small rural congregation are:

- Intimacy and an awareness of the immanence of God.
- Relevance to those attending/participating
- Easily adaptable and responsive to situations
- Informal patterns of worship and ministry enable a participatory style or dialogue to take place.
- Engaging with the lives of individuals and of the community
- A real experience of koinonia where people are both fully known and fully accepted.
- Larger villages and country towns will offer the greatest scope for developing fresh expressions of church.

Fresh expressions may provide a valuable way of reaching many of the “new villagers” with the gospel as well as a more appropriate context for nurturing new disciples from within that sector.

Fresh expressions of church might be something entirely new that is established in a rural situation. It might be more appropriate for existing rural churches to explore the possibility of developing fresh expressions that will exist alongside the inherited models where holding on to these is seen as relevant or important. At present few models of fresh expressions appear to exist. I have been trying hard to identify these with little success. A fresh expression in a rural Anglican context in Devon would not be seen as particularly radical to most Congregational churches.

But there is no reason why boldness and experimentation ought not to take place. As various fresh expressions are reported -even those in urban situations - these may well provide some inspiration for the rural areas.

Example 1.

A congregational church in a mainly working class village of around 1250 with another 1000 in two nearby settlements was presented with an opportunity when a new village hall was built on land donated by two of its members. The church was given priority booking for the morning of the first Sunday of each month.

The church had already changed a great deal and used contemporary language, an informal style of relaxed contemporary worship, in a chapel stripped of the usual church furnishings.

The church cancelled its usual service on those Sundays and established “The Sunday Supplement” where people sit café style with Sunday broadsheets spread around. News is shared through interviews with special Christian guests who either have an interesting personal story or expertise in a relevant topic. Interaction through questions and comments are encouraged. After the half-way break when refreshments are served.

Friendship evangelism takes place as relationships are built, as does pastoral ministry. The meeting which is at least one third “outsiders” buzzes during this time. People have attended regularly and even brought their friends and relatives into what is like a TV chat show. There is no congregational singing, no scripture readings or intercessions. Yet a spirit of worship is often engendered and the gospel and Bible teaching comes through earthed in what is shared through the interview and open discussion time. It is an unthreatening, cringe-free, and gentle process. Originally set up as an outreach it has become church for many who have come to faith and grown in fellowship and discipleship in this context.

Example 2.

A young Christian couple who had moved to the village described in the example above had come from a large town charismatic Anglican church. While there was much in the life of the church that they appreciated they felt that there were many around their own age with young families for whom an alternative form of church would be helpful.

They set up a programme called “Space” in their home on Saturday evenings where people could come in a relaxed situation with no structure to the time. Worship and Bible study took place fairly casually. Sunday mornings their home was also open for brunch and simple fellowship.

The pastor of the Congregational church had hoped that this new expression might exist alongside the local churches as part of the variety of life already available in his church. Sadly, the couple wanted to have control and did it their own way. In the process they drew some of the young families within the Congregational church away and severed existing fellowship. They have attracted some folk but they remain few and mainly those unhappy with other forms of church.

They now meet alternate Saturday evening in various homes with informal worship and Bible Study, and on the alternate Sundays in between meet for brunch and just fellowship.

It is the pastor’s view that they have deprived themselves of blessing that would have come through the constraint of being part of the Congregational church where their vision would have been keenly supported.

It is a fresh expression of church but the value of establishing a fifth church in such a small community is questionable. There was already a Parish Church, the Congregational church, a Friends Meeting, and an exclusive long-established house church. It has possibly left more people confused than it may have helped.

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