

Getting fresh in the countryside

The following article was written by Capt. Gordon Banks CA for a diocesan magazine. In it he reflects on the issue of fresh expressions of church and on the REN 2007 conference.

Imagine you have inherited a café in a rural setting. The café is a building of historical interest and subject to certain preservation orders. Very little has been done inside the building by way of redevelopment and similarly the menu remains much the same year on year. There is a small but loyal group of customers. You know however that this small group cannot sustain the café and things need to be done. So, where do you start and what might you do?

The report 'mission-shaped church' (2004) spawned other reports and books that looked in more detail at what it might be mission-shaped in various context or in various peoples group, for example children and young people. In 2006 Sally Gaze published her book Mission shaped and Rural. George Lings of the Sheffield Research Centre has also produced an 'Encounters on the Edge' looking at rural fresh expressions of church. (See resources below for contact details)

The initial work of the national Fresh Expressions team, headed up by Steven Croft, was largely reporting about fresh expressions in an urban or inner-city context. But increasingly they began collaborating with other bodies and agencies working in the countryside. Part of the fruit of this collaboration was a recent 24 hour conference organised by the Rural Evangelism Network. The title was 'Thinking Outside the Box' - rural fresh expressions of church. Around 50 delegates gathered at Hothorpe Hall in Leicestershire.

The main aim of the event was to give opportunity for the sharing of stories, discussion and asking questions. To stimulate our thinking Norman Ivison, part of the Fresh Expressions Team with a responsibility for training and development opened up our time by outlining what a fresh expression might look like, particularly in the countryside. We also spent some time considering just what is meant by rural, a very slippery term itself. We recognised that the 'rural pattern' is multifarious and often quite complex even within one village. This was evident in the ensuing time together as we heard various stories of both success and failures in sessions helpfully led by Danny Bevan of Rural Expressions. Several factors stood out for me.

The pattern of mission and evangelism for many years was to send people out and bring in the harvest, back into the fold. But increasingly it is seen that a better way might be to go and build a sheep pen in the field! The other important aspect is that of choice, not easy to offer in a village church. But people, even rural folk, are used to being offered a choice, a film in the nearby multiplex, food and goods in the neighbouring supermarket, a type of coffee at Starbucks in their nearest Market Town, and in the way they worship God! Apparently 'the black only Model T was a myth', black was easier and more popular. But we have moved on and today there are over a hundred choices of types and additions that can be made to Smart car.

This is the place where a number of *fresh expressions* have begun: seeking “to proclaim the gospel afresh in each generation”. We have to think of fresh like coffee or orange juice, same thing, but presented fresh, very few people like stale coffee or orange juice. However it needs to be said that the opposite of fresh expressions of church is not stale, but perhaps mature, developed or inherited ways of being church. If there is one vital key it is that of double listening, to the community and to God. The Fresh Expressions team have produced a mission audit for helping set up fresh expressions and time spent doing homework is invaluable. A key factor that must be avoided at all cost is to simply try and take a model or an idea and assume it will work in our own setting.

For example we heard the story of the Salvation Army seeking to develop their work in Market Harborough. Their research showed that people were generally contented, the churches worked well together, nothing apparently for the SA to do differently. However as their research continued they did notice something they could address. Many of the dads worked long hours away in London so on Saturday mornings they set up a Dads and Tots group. This gave the dads a chance to play with their children and to meet other men. Natural developments have been curry nights and other ventures. From this a worshipping community is beginning to emerge. Listening, loving service, acts of worship and discipleship is the preferred pattern. If we equate church with worship and that in a particular and peculiar way, then as someone said, we have to stop starting with the church!

Because some of them have been around for a little time we often forget that every church building is a church plant and at one time offered a particular and peculiar expression of church. There was a time when they did not exist, and there may well be a time in the future when they disappear. Nothing is set in stone, not even church buildings!