



News from the **RURAL EVANGELISM NETWORK**

Churches and Mission Agencies sharing insights and experiences
to encourage good practise in rural mission

Autumn 2017

This year we celebrate our 35th birthday, which we plan to mark with an enquiry. For several years prior to 1982, the leaders of mission organisations established to evangelise rural Britain met informally on an annual basis for mutual encouragement. For two years these had been held on the premises of the Evangelical Alliance. In 1981, the then British Council of Churches set up a programme called “*Nationwide Initiative for Evangelization*”. This had a broader theological basis.

During 1982 the EA and NIE agreed to arrange a meeting for those concerned for rural evangelism, but each separately invited people from their own mailing lists. The meeting, held at the offices of the Bible Society in London, was rather uncomfortable as conservative evangelicals found themselves meeting with catholic and liberal church leaders, and vice versa.

A second gathering was arranged six months later, but this time independently from NIE and EA. All seemed assured that by bringing representatives from the Churches and representatives from rural evangelistic agencies together, there was value to the work of spreading the Good News in rural areas. The work of the *Rural Evangelism Network* had begun, though it was then called *The Federation for Rural Evangelism*.

The Network grew with representatives at dioceses, synods and regional associations, joined the national representatives. To the mix was added several resourcing organisations. The founding members determined two key factors. The Network was to retain a clear focus on proclamatory evangelism, and would not produce a doctrinal statement, so that the purpose of the Network would be the determining factor for membership.

In its early life the Network produced a book called *Ten Rural Churches, two Workbooks on Rural Evangelism*, held bi-annual conferences with two separate consultations in the years between conferences.

35 years later, thought there have been changes, we continue to provide...

- A forum for sharing insight and experience, though now mostly through our website and *Country Way*, in which we are editorial partners.
- A voice for rural evangelism within the Churches Rural Group, which is responsible for running the bi-annual *Germinate Conference*, among other things.
- A voice for rural evangelism within the Churches Group for Evangelization, a body that brings together key people from national Churches and some others concerned for the evangelization of England.

Two worrying developments

Most, if not all the member bodies of the Network have suffered financial difficulties. This has had a double impact, especially for the Churches. Budgets have been cut and often jobs have been doubled up. With more things to do and less money to do it with, attending national conferences became a problem.

As the founding members were either moved to more senior positions in their Churches, or into other roles, those who replaced them sometimes did not have the same passion. What they did have was multiple responsibilities, and evangelism was not always a priority.

The 2017 Enquiry

With approximately 10,000,000 people living in the rural areas (incl country towns with populations no larger than 5,000), the challenge of re-evangelizing rural Britain is as great as it was in 1982.

Though many villages are now more suburban, there are still some aspects of village life and village church life that requires patterns of evangelism that are culturally different from that practised in larger towns and cities. Knowledge of what is appropriate and effective still needs to be shared.

Village churches, for the main part, have small congregations that often lack confidence when it

comes to sharing their faith. They need support and encouragement.

We estimate that if all the evangelist resources of the specialist rural missions were combined this would meet no more than around 2% of the need. However, the gifts, experience and skills of rural mission agencies are an important resource to the Churches.

The mission agencies benefit from the insight and experience of those engaged in, or responsible for, settled ministry in rural churches.

The first question our enquiry asks is whether there is still a need for the sharing of insights and experiences of both the agencies and those in key positions in the Churches with rural presence.

If the answer to the question is “yes”, then **the second question** will be how to maximise the benefits that the mix of key people from Churches and Agencies provides.

Clearly, at present, the Network has suffered from the loss of appropriate conference and consultation opportunity. Also many helpful stories of rural evangelism experience are failing to find their way into either the website or *Country Way*. We could do so much better.

We not only need to ask what we could do to improve, but also how to do it, and also the important “Who” question will need to be answered. There are bound to be several subsidiary questions to explore.

The bottom line has to be that the Network has to add value to its members. To some extent this will only be achieved by the representatives of the member Churches and Agencies both feeding in and drawing upon the collective wisdom of the Network.

What will the enquiry look like?

It is possible that this will come in two forms. It is anticipated that a user-friendly online survey form will be important. At present the Network Committee members are only just starting the process. Care will be needed to frame the right questions, and to organise the number crunching afterwards.

But face-to-face conversation would add an important dynamic and could well prove a more creative way of progressing the Enquiry. If a 24 hour conference is arranged, it is most likely to be in the Spring of 2018 and include helpful sessions.

It is probable that to reach a valuable outcome, both the online survey and conference will be needed.

Changes in County Way

This excellent magazine was set up as a collaborative venture between the Arthur Rank Centre, the Rural Evangelism Network, the Agricultural Christian Fellowship and the Rural Theology Association. Later, ownership was transferred to the Arthur Rank Centre (now Germinate), but the partnership continues at a planning and editorial level.

Since *Country Way* serves as a publication for the Rural Evangelism Network, a free copy is provided to each representative in the Network. A few years ago, as the magazine also went online, REN members were asked to indicate whether they preferred a nice printed copy or would rather have online access, which some found helpful to research, or copy articles. REN paid for both versions.

Now you can have the best of both worlds. The splendid printed copy can reside on your coffee table, or be passed on to others. The online version is now accessible free. If you haven't seen a printed copy, we hope you will enjoy receiving one on this occasion. You will note that the feature in this issue is sharing faith.

In future, if you have previously had the online access, you will receive a printed copy.

If you already receive a copy, either through personal subscription, please pass the second copy to someone who might benefit from it, or become a subscriber. A subscription form may be enclosed.

The annual membership fee for the Rural *Evangelism Network* remains at a modest £45. This includes a free copy of *Country Way* for one or both representatives. This topic will be included in the Enquiry.

Developing Missional Churches

Being “missional” could be expressed in various ways, but many in our rural churches find the idea intimidating. One way of helping them to discover appropriate ways is through the regular free webinars.

Our next webinar is only a few days away (21st October), but there is still time to register. All that is needed is a free hour and an internet connection with sound. The theme this time is Mission Ideas and Resources for Christmas and Winter. **Please pass on this information as soon as possible.** Registration link can be found at www.RuralMissionSolutions.org.uk