

## **Devon Churches Rural Forum Conference**

### **Re-imagining Rural Ministry: Towards new structures**

**Held on 28<sup>th</sup> July 2018 at Cullompton Community Centre, Devon**

### **Proceedings**

#### **Summary**

The conference tackled some of the following subjects:

- Change – or should we call it adapting to our modern context?
- Turning aside to the Bright Field – a focus on the present and what is to come rather than dwelling in what has been.
- The great variety of marvellous activities and service already being undertaken by our rural churches within their communities.
- The need to help people see that where they are and what they do in daily life is their Christian ministry, and help to develop a language of faith that leads to deepening relationships and conversations.
- New structures for multi-parish groups being needed to support the current reality of people, governance requirements and the mission and ministry priority.
- Learning reflective skills, valuing and celebrating what we have, considering what resources and structures best support the good.
- Great emphasis, in all models of ministry explored, on the ministry of all believers, of collaborative working, identifying gifts, calling out and supporting through training and mentoring.
- The need for specialist ministries.
- Flexibility with clergy budgets to support whole church ministry.
- Learning together and becoming a Learning Community.
- Finding ways to facilitate ecumenical dialogue and co-operation at the “middle” level (deaneries and circuits being non-contiguous to consider only two denominations) as well as at the District/Diocese level and on the ground practical working.
- Exploring the special gifts of each church and what it can bring to the whole.
- Our churches and communities having already within them all the gifts needed to be a ministering community in their place.
- Never forgetting that we exist to serve others – those people who live and work and visit our communities.

What follows are summaries of all the presentations and discussions, with links to the full materials where available and the resources cited by the presenters.

## Opening Session

### Summary of Rev'd Graham Thompson's – Chairman of Plymouth and Exeter Methodist District – Opening Address

Read Rev'd Graham's full address [here](#)

Listen to an audio recording of Rev'd Graham's and Bishop Robert's addresses here <https://bit.ly/2MNBpiu>

Rev'd Graham spoke about change: the pace of change in the world we live in contrasted with the pace, and resistance to change, in the rural church. He asks, given how vital the rural church is to its local community, whether there is anything we can do to increase the pace of engagement with the world in which the church is placed, and what it is that makes the rural church reluctant to change. He suggests four possible reasons for the latter, including the need for a place of stability in an uncertain world, the age of our congregations, a focus on keeping those who are already faithful rather than risk losing them by making changes that may or may not attract others, and the stumbling blocks of church structures and powerful individuals. He emphasises the need to be clear on our diagnosis before beginning to prescribe remedies, and to mitigate the stumbling blocks in order to make progress.

He highlights two particular facets of rural church life. First that all aspects of church life are as important in the rural church as they are in every other context, that they are as theologically and prayerfully engaged and are usually more connected to and embedded in their local communities than other types of church. And secondly, the strengths that can come from being a small church, though not all rural churches are small. He concludes by quoting the metaphor "a tangerine is not a failed orange". The rural church needs to be recognised for its differences and strengths rather than problems and weaknesses, and if we can do that we will get a long way indeed.

### Summary of The Right Rev'd Robert Atwell's – Bishop of Exeter – Opening Address

Read Bishop Robert's full address [here](#)

Bishop Robert begins by saying that though the rural church is often described as a "problem", recent reports have shown that the rural church is one of the greatest success stories of the Church of England. He speaks about the diversity within the rural church and offers insightful examples of how the culture of our different communities is reflected in the types of church activities and initiatives that are likely to engage them. He notes that rural congregations can be small which limits the number of people clergy have to work with and also the growing ecumenical nature of the rural church.

Bishop Robert spoke about the relationship villages have with their parish church, even though they may not be regular worshippers, and the need to make our buildings fit for the

21<sup>st</sup> century and working best for their communities – in this respect he referenced the [“Growing the Rural Church”](#) project.

In respect of worship, he says regularity, context and quality all matter, coupled with the need to reach new people in new ways. With the reduction of the number of stipendiary clergy the need to train more and better lay leaders is really important and he referred to the report [“Setting God’s People Free”](#) about releasing the gifts of the people of God, and the recent appointment of a new Lay Discipleship Project Leader for the diocese. He speaks of the missional challenge being to make Jesus Christ known and help people to make the connections between him and everything they intuitively feel and know about the created order.

Bishop Robert spoke about flexibility in church structure and governance and encouraged parishes to explore what is possible. He also praised the capacities of rural communities for self-generation, resilience, grit, perseverance and innate entrepreneurial ability to adapt, and the need for the churches to encourage a similar spirit of entrepreneurship to adapt to a changing landscape.

In relation to the age profile of people in our communities Bishop Robert spoke about the gifts of older people and the missional opportunity to engage with their growing constituency. In relation to children he spoke about the need to work ecumenically and to “dove-tail” our work in schools more effectively into our mission strategy.

He concluded by saying that in his experience mission and ministry in the countryside work best when churches co-operate rather than compete and his hope for our conference was for the emergence of a new vision and willingness to work in partnership in new and imaginative ways for the kingdom of God.

### **Appreciative Enquiry Exercise**

Following the introductory addresses, participants were invited to participate in an “Appreciative Enquiry” process lead by Alison Ball (Learning & Development Coordinator (Discipleship Development), South West).

People were asked to think about one thing that had made them “proud”, in the sense of where they felt God was at work, there had been a good use of resources, something just felt right, the outcome was really good, they felt “this is why we’re here ...”

They were also asked to consider why they felt so positive about it, and what had made it feel worthwhile to them. Alison explained that thinking about what made people think something is worthwhile links into their personal values, and thus the church’s values.

Following this they were asked to consider how church structures and decision making processes, and available resources of people, funding, space etc. contributed (or not) to their “story”.

You can read the full questions for the exercise [here](#) and notes from the plenary discussion following the exercise [here](#)

### **A note about Appreciative Enquiry**

The website [www.betterevaluation.org](http://www.betterevaluation.org) describes Appreciative Enquiry as follows:

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to organisational change which focuses on strengths rather than on weaknesses - quite different to many approaches to evaluation which focus on deficits and problems.

*"Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. It involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential." (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005, p.3)*

Focusing on life, energy and strength as it does, this approach may be a helpful one for church councils and other groups. Though the example given is a "business" one, you can read more about the process of Appreciative Enquiry from the WhatIs.com website [here](#)

### **Models of Rural Ministry from Practitioners and Experimenters**

**Listen to an audio recording** of presentations from Liz Singleton, Susanna Metz, Tim Treanor, Nick Shutt and Rosie Austin, chaired by Rev'd Simon Franklin here <https://bit.ly/2MNBpiu>

### **West Devon Methodist Circuit – Rev'd Liz Singleton – Summary Notes**

The [West Devon Methodist Circuit](#) comprises 15 churches covering 400 square miles on the northern edge of Dartmoor. It includes the towns of Okehampton, Hatherleigh and North Tawton, but otherwise all the churches are in rural villages and hamlets.

In 2016 the circuit went through the "stationing" process to appoint a new minister but was not successful. So with only one stipendiary minister, they decided to come out of the process for two years and review what ministry in each church might look like.

Part of the process for this has been to ask each congregation and member the same questions over and over again, namely:

- What are you doing here?
- Why are you doing what you are doing?
- Can you sustain the work you are currently doing?
- Where is God in all the things that are happening in this place.

The repetitive nature of the questions allows for deeper answers to develop and conversations are ongoing. They are also a constant reminder to consider the “here and now” and what is to come, rather than concentrate on the past.

The circuit then employed a new youth worker (to replace one who had left) and two family workers. This meant that work with children and families was enabled to grow. Then followed the employment of a Lay Assistant to assist the stipendiary minister in pastoral work and the ongoing care of people in the circuit. The person appointed has many gifts and is now also able to chair church meetings, lead bible study and is working in a leadership role. The circuit plans to employ a second Lay Assistant to work in a different part of the circuit – the gifts and skills they bring determining the exact shape of the role.

Funding for these posts has come from selling some buildings, using some of the money that would otherwise have been used to fund the second stipendiary minister, and some grant funding. But these sources are finite, so there is a challenge now to work out how to continue funding this work.

The question is now being asked “how best do you maintain the Christian presence in your community?” and “do you need the building?” Churches are being encouraged to think about the use of their buildings, working ecumenically, and to identify what it really is their communities need and how we can work together to meet those needs.

One difficulty of addressing these questions in the ecumenical context is that Methodist circuits and Anglican deaneries/parishes are not contiguous in the boundaries, which makes facilitating conversations tricky!

Liz is starting some consultative work to help the churches explore the needs of their communities. One church is engaging with [Fruitfulness on the Front Line](#) which encourages people to think about where they are most of their time and how they can be a Christian presence there. She is also helping people to be able to have Christian conversations with people they meet – to take conversations and relationships deeper than the level of normal friendly chats to talk about faith. One very rural chapel has changed its worship pattern from fortnightly to monthly and a short act of worship is followed by conversation and the collating of the history of the chapel and its people over the years. The congregation has grown from 3 to 20 people! The new pattern is drawing people together in a new way, and even if the chapel does close, they will have left a legacy and brought people together. United services do happen – but asking people to move to a different chapel can be hard – and there are usually discussions about who gets the collection!

Liz concluded by saying that change means different things in different contexts, and it is hard. But, once people are involved, and have some say and ownership in the process, they come up with some very good ideas and in the circuit, change is now being initiated by the churches themselves and not only by the leadership team. Thank God.

## **The Northern Michigan Model – Rev’d Susanna Metz**

See Susanna’s full presentation [here](#)

Visit the Diocese of Northern Michigan’s website Mutual Ministry pages [here](#)

Find information about the book, referenced by Susanna, “Born of Water, Born of Spirit” [here](#)

### **Summary Notes**

The diocese of Northern Michigan covers a larger geographic area, and the congregations of the churches are numerically bigger, but they are of a similar number, with a similar number of stipendiary clergy, to our rural deaneries. The stipendiary ministers are involved with sacramental and pastoral ministry but primarily act as supporting missionaries, enablers and teachers.

The model used is referred to as “Mutual Ministry” *All ministry is Christ’s; every baptised person is an active participant therein, each according to gift. The main area for ministry is in the midst of daily life.*

The latter sentence is key. Susanna says that people understand this by nature – but how do we help them to see this as ministry? And how do we then give people the language to have conversations of faith?

She quoted Bishop Curry (of royal wedding fame) in saying “If you’re breathing, you’re called”. That is the goal of the ministering communities – God has given into each community all the gifts they need to minister in their place. Susanna referenced the book “Born of Water, Born of Spirit” which explores the understanding of the full ministry of all the baptised.

There is a formal structured process in place for churches interested in working in this way. Working with the supporting missionary, individuals are identified for the needed ministries, called forth, trained locally and then licensed or ordained (depending upon role) as part of the ministering community.

Much more information is available on the Northern Michigan website, or by contacting Susanna direct [petrockstowevicaris@gmail.com](mailto:petrockstowevicaris@gmail.com) to discuss. It is likely that this model has application to our Mission Communities or deaneries.

## **The Learning Community – Rev’d Tim Treanor**

See Tim’s presentation handout [here](#)

Find information on the book “Kingdom Learning” referenced by Tim [here](#)

Read the report “Released for Mission” referenced by Tim, the 2015 C of E report subtitled “Growing the Rural Church” [here](#)

Read the 2017 C of E report “Setting God’s People Free” which focuses on enabling and releasing the gifts of the all the people of God [here](#)

## Summary

The [Wellington and District Team Ministry](#) has 13 churches, covering 500 square km. There are three stipendiary clergy, one self-supporting associate priest and two Readers.

Tim began with a reading of the poem “[The Bright Field](#)” by R S Thomas, from which The [Bright Field Community](#) takes its name.

By way of background, he referred to the Bishop’s charge to him and the Team when he was licensed. It was, he said, a clear, prophetic word to re-imagine ministry – a call to all to become active disciples. With colleagues he pondered the report “[Released for Mission](#)” which says that deepening discipleship in the countryside is critical and the report “[Setting God’s People Free](#)”, asking the question “how do we help all of God’s people to engage with his mission and ministry”.

The result was the birth of a “Learning Community” in the team, the focus of which is to shift attention to encouraging spiritually maturing disciples in mission through encouraging Christian practices in daily life (roots), enabling structures (trunk) and theological reflection (branches) leading to the fruit in due season of maturing disciples engaged in mission.

He referred to Christian practices of prayer, Sabbath, worship and the sharing of food as the things that have sustained Christian Community for hundreds of years. The enabling structures include a common “mission fund”, a governance handbook, an evaluation model, sessional posts and changing the role of the ministers to being more enabling and collaborative. Theological reflection uses the [Pastoral Cycle](#) of experience, analysis, reflection and action. The five areas of fruitfulness include: Growing the church younger, going on growing in later life, using the creative arts to help explain the Christian story, social action and a whole life of discipleship.

One of the “enabling structures” has been the development of “sessional” posts such as a part time school chaplain, an artist in residence, an administrator, and others. Some of these posts are paid and some are voluntary. The team is also investing in training and resources.

Though it is early days, the steps taken so far include the Team Vicar post becoming a 100% missionary, a Reader becoming Reader-in-charge of 4 parishes and a self-supporting priest being in charge of two other parishes. PtO clergy are involved and the money which would have been used for the house for duty post has been invested in lay ministry, alongside other money from grant and other fund raising activities.

Tim says that some hard decisions have been needed but that the team are building on existing learning and experience and releasing energy and removing barriers to move forward. God has taken fragile, vulnerable people and enabled the ministries needed. It is the beginning of a journey.

For those contemplating a similar approach, Tim referenced the book “Kingdom Learning: Experiential and Reflective Approaches to Christian Formation” by David Heywood, which he believes will be a significant text for our time covering the missiology, ecclesiology and pedagogy of the “experiment” of the Learning Community they are developing. He wishes it had been available before they began their journey as it contains much of the wisdom they have learned!

### **The West Dartmoor Mission Community – Rev’d Nick Shutt**

Read Nick’s full presentation [here](#)

#### **Summary**

The [West Dartmoor Mission Community](#) comprises seven churches on the west of Dartmoor working in co-operation with the Methodist churches in the area. The current shape of ministry and mission in the Mission Community is the result of a fifteen year journey – the journey being more important than the structures at the end.

After the introduction of [Moving on in Mission and Ministry](#) the churches struggled for five years with ways of working together, but change was difficult. In 2008 the process was “re-booted” and the question asked how could the churches work together to form a “brand” – the West Dartmoor Mission Community – so that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. There followed experimentation, communication and consultation and the churches began working “as if” they were a Mission Community, gradually developing their thinking. During this time, the parishes set up an informal Mission Community Council with the PCCs granting powers to the MCC. The MCC began to set the missional objectives for the MC and organised the shape of the worship pattern. The PCCs continued to look after the buildings, for example.

2014 was a year of taking stock and looking at the options available. In his presentation Nick discusses the “minster model” and the fully co-operative model, involving all the churches. He discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both models in the context of the West Dartmoor MC – these are fully described in the linked presentation.

The MC decided that the minister model, with a hub and satellite churches was not for them. The way forward would be the co-operative model where all churches have equal weight with a central Mission Community Council devolving certain powers back to the individual PCCS.



In 2018, the MC is a united benefice of six parishes and looking to becoming a single parish to facilitate this model. The Mission Community Council controls the MAP which is reviewed annually at an away day. The mission aims are set centrally, as is the service pattern, and is dovetailed into [Diocesan Strategy – Pray, grow, and serve with joy](#). The PCCs deal with delegated matters – buildings etc.

Nick encouraged us not to fear failure – rather to experiment and stop something if it does not work. The MC also celebrates successes including their Thursday evening service, use of social media and website, partnering with others and identifying the “USP” (unique selling point) or special gifting and place of each church for concerts, ministry to visitors – including “[champing](#)” at St Mary the Virgin, Walkhampton and more. The Mission Community also holds Poppins for mums and toddlers, an all age service, has developed a benefice choir, has parish based lay worship teams and offers supper evenings, men’s breakfasts and ladies lunches. There are viable home groups, a new Reader vocation and a part time administrator as well as good engagement at MC meetings.

For the future there are ongoing concerns – some parishes still find it difficult to recruit enough “officers”, there are financial burdens, the MC still finds it difficult to engage with children and young people and the age profile of the congregations is a concern. However, these factors are unsurprising says Nick, and will drive further change.

He concludes with these words from 1 Thessalonians 5.24

**The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.**

**Vision Circles – Rev’d Rosie Austin**

Read Rosie’s full presentation notes [here](#)

**Summary**

Rosie is Team Rector of the [Shirwell Mission Community](#) in North Devon. The MC comprises eight churches in seven rural parishes.

Rosie said that while some models of church structures are described using triangles, these can sometimes feel rather hierarchical. Rosie describes the “circles model”, where, in the centre, lies the person living in the village, who may or not come to church. This is the person who the church serves. Our parishes exist for the sake of “the other” – that person – yet because of the burdens we carry we can sometimes forget this priority and forget why God has put us in this place.

Looking at the wider circles nesting within one another we have the parish, mission community, deanery and diocesan circles. We have everything we need in a place, but often parishes feel ill-equipped. The role of the Mission Community is to support the mission of the parish in serving the people who live within it. The role of the deanery, which can

sometimes feel like “box-ticking” can be about supporting MCs and parishes through local training, support and creative ministry.

Rosie has been working with “Stories on the Street” as part of the Growing the Rural Church project. This work followed on from the 2016 visit to the Diocese of Exeter’s link diocese of Thika in Kenya where “churches are encouraged to consider and trust that God has given them all they need to be a flourishing Christian presence in their communities” - you can find out more about this work [here](#). This is part of the wider movement of Umoja – Swahili for Unity or Togetherness – where churches are encouraged to work with their communities to meet needs using resources they have available within themselves – to find out more click [here](#).

## **Practical Exercise**

The afternoon comprised a practical case study exercise in groups followed by a plenary discussion.

The task was to take the input and ideas from the morning sessions and use them to consider what possible structures and tools you would need to enable mission and ministry to flourish in the case study area. You can read the task scenario [here](#).

Participants brought together ideas from all the above presentations in tackling this exercise, which was designed to be as close to real life as possible, blending them into a practical whole. You can read their thoughts and suggestions [here](#).

## **Final Plenary Session**

### **General comments**

- You need top down, bottom up
- Sustained change is extremely hard
- In the storm ‘Do not be afraid’
- God brings resurrection not us. So we need to stay in the storm.
- Travel with others
- ‘Toolkit for the nervous’ – not prescriptive
- Do we over talk about ‘change’ and more about adapting

### **Themes**

- Calling for all ‘You are breathing .... You are called’
- Good training offered locally to enable people to do what they need to do!
- Identify giftings & develop what you have. Audit skills. Mutually discerned.
- Use clergy budget creatively

- Understanding our community needs
- Celebrating what we have. Appreciative enquiry
- Form follows function. What do we want to achieve? Structures follow that.
- Resourcing current clergy/lay leaders to lead strategic thinking
- Prayer

### **Next steps**

- TED – ex talks of 4 presenters from today  
What did they do  
Some questions  
Grab interest  
Something visual
- What is coming to free up structures. Info on simplification
- Info on creative use of clergy budget – ideas on how it be used
- ‘Toolkit’ – not prescriptive, but placing what we have had the opportunity to discuss today in the public realm – for our PCCs, for training clergy
- Tour of input for today. Video. Roadshow
- Facilitated smaller conversations/learning communities
- Serving with joy – have fun

With many thanks to all presenters, all participants and those who have supplied the material for this summary.