

Report from the National Rural Officers Gathering at Stoneleigh November 2018

This is a brief report of the two days of the Gathering and covers the main areas of our conversations

Introduction by the new CEO Rev Claire Maxim and the Methodist and United Reformed Church National Rural officer, Rev Elizabeth Clark. Greetings were received from Rev Mark Betson the new Church of England Rural Officer who had taken over from Dr Jill Hopkinson.

As usual with the gathering there was a mixture of input from speakers as well as reflection on the work of Rural officers across the country.

The first session was led by Dr Stephen Skuce

from the Methodist Church who led us through the latest national statistics for attendance at a number of Methodist Churches across the connexion, and from these statistics 20 churches which showed growth were looked at in greater detail. Within the denomination there is a numerical decline although there are some signs of growth. It was noted that while the Methodist Church has always had a social involvement, that by itself does not translate into making more disciples of Christ. Some churches are growing though and there are some common characteristics to such churches. These are

- Being welcoming, hospitable and caring
- Being responsive and actively inclusive
- Making available intentional spiritual development opportunities
- Participatory involvement and collaborative leadership
- Enabling change and overcoming barriers to growth

We are enabling a process of opportunity here which challenges some of the existing power structures and explores ways of faith sharing today. In order to do this we need to develop a 'virtuous cycle of growth' in the outworking of the five aspects above.

To do this churches need to develop a virtuous cycle of growth, linking these areas of church life

- They are responsive to people and community which include opportunity for participation
- There is a development of a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission'
- This builds on community engagement and activities
- Sharing in intentional mission and evangelism

The numerical decline in Methodism has been noted and steps are being taken to explore ways of engagement in which the emphasis moves towards an intentional evangelism whilst continuing to explore the way that social action is also part of the work of the Church.

See https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/4891/leading_together_final_report.pdf for more detail of the research in North East England

The second session was led by Rev Andrew Roberts looking at Holy Habits (www.holyhabits.co.uk)

Andrew shared a session exploring discipleship as a life long discipline quoting Mark Green from the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity 'discipleship is not just what we do when we gather but is a whole life calling to be lived out in the whole of our lives, in working life, in family life, in politics – we are called as disciples of Jesus within the world.'

Holy habits takes its biblical focus from Acts 2 v 42 – 47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (NRSV)

It is this expression of faith that Holy Habits recognises and offers a way to develop discipleship. Holy habits are based on the following key features

- Time
- Transcultural
- For all – for all demographics, rural/urban in a context of developing discipleship
- Individual discipleship
- Small groups
- Exploring church life
- For smaller and larger churches
- Groups of churches can explore holy habits together

Within the programme there are 10 habits

- Biblical Teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of bread
- Prayer
- Sharing of resources
- Service
- Eating together
- Gladness and generosity
- Worship
- Making disciples

What Holy Habits gives is a framework for Christian discipleship, exploring the cycle of the seasons and the development of patterns of prayer and action. It is not a prescriptive programme that we follow but rather an opportunity to release creativity and an engagement with the Holy Spirit.

Session 3 reflected on what was happening in rural contexts across the country and was a conversation between the rural officers present

The following were explored

- Getting our voice heard
- How do we provide time and resources for Rural officers ?
- How do Rural officers link with church structures?
- How do we manage transitions for new Rural officers?
- What are the challenges to the development of the Rural officers network?
- How do we raise the profile of the rural church/rural community?
- Rural churches don't always 'take' but can 'give' as well
- How do we find champions for rural church life and how can we speak in a coordinated way?
- How can we change the mindset of the leadership of the church?
- How do we deal with 'urban indrag'
- There needs to be people at a strategic level (eg Bishops council) in each diocese
- Need a strategic modelling for supporting rural churches and communities – not just tokenism

The session continued later looking at

- Getting our voice heard
- What is sustainable church growth and how might we achieve it?
- How do we as a Church engage with Rural Community issues?
- How do we move beyond a 'fragile' rural church to a church exploring discipleship and engaging with its community?
- What is a sustainable rural church/community within the 21st century UK context?

Session 4 reflected on Modern Slavery in a session led by Caroline Virgo and Caroline Pinchbeck

Modern slavery takes many forms and is not limited to Urban Centres. Modern slavery is often hidden which makes it difficult to spot and to deal with. There are some rural sectors within which modern slavery can be hidden. The sectors that are at risk of being targeted include

- Agriculture including fruit picking
- Horticulture
- Equestrian
- Food processing
- Food packing
- Food manufacturing
- Large Construction projects
- Hospitality businesses
- Tourism
- Sex workers
- Care sector
- Casual labour gangs which are based in rural areas but which service urban areas eg Driveway contractors
- Car washes
- People living in isolated areas

The Clewer initiative (<https://www.theclewerinitiative.org/>) offers resources for local churches to explore the contexts of modern slavery. This initiative looks at 7 things to look out for

- What strikes you about a situation which doesn't look right?
- Is there an unusual pattern of movement – eg van pickups
- Are there many people coming and going from a premises
- Are people not wanting to engage with the wider community
- Be alert to people who don't have a normal weekend
- Recognise people who don't have a mid day meal
- Property lets – short term HMO's etc

If something doesn't seem right then there are ways of reporting this including the Modern Slavery Hotline. The modern slavery act gives a definition of modern slavery.

If a person has been tricked, trapped or traded they are likely to be held in modern slavery.

Session 5 ARC notices

Germinate Leadership Programme

Is an 18 month personal development programme for lay and ordained leaders within the rural church. It is ecumenical in nature (although most of the take up is from the Anglican church at present – a situation which it is hoped will change in the future).

There is also a Germinate lecture which takes place in May every year and a conference.

Details from Louise louised@germinate.net

Elizabeth Clark spoke about 'open welcome' and how church buildings can be used to engage people with the faith story that has shaped them.

Session 5

Looked at Loneliness and Isolation in Rural contexts and was led by Alison Selwood.

There a local and national focus on loneliness and its impact on individuals, families and communities. Loneliness and isolation are separate in that

Isolation is a lack of social contact which is a tangible and measurable concept which can lead to loneliness.

Loneliness is a mismatch between quality and quantity of social relationships

There are 1.2 million chronically lonely people in the UK. 1.5 million people can go for a week without seeing or speaking with anyone.

People of all ages can experience loneliness

Those who are isolated (in different ways – eg through lack of transport, or poverty, or through health issues) are often hidden and many are hidden in rural areas. Churches have many local links and can develop community partnerships to offer support and create meeting points in local communities.

Alison is developing a toolkit for further reflection and action in this area of community life, exploring ways that the Church can become more involved in offering support to those who are lonely and isolated.

The closing session

Was a conversation was led by Claire Maxim the new CEO around the way that Germinate had developed over the past 7 years when her predecessor Jerry was CEO.

The organisation has moved to new accommodation on the Stoneleigh site and with the appointment of a new CEO has the opportunity to take stock of where the organisation is and how it might assist rural churches in the future.

ARC has a voice at National level speaking with DEFRA officials on occasions. This will continue as will the work of the national rural officers. There will be changes in the future but the ARC will continue to be a voice for rural churches and support rural churches now and in the future.