

The Changing Face of the Countryside – Session 1 of the Conference “Faith and the Future of the Countryside” with Bishop Alan Smith, held at Lee Abbey, Devon, 23rd to 27th September 2019

Notes from the lecture taken by Penny Dobbin

Rural Life

The expectation of a perfect rural village is false, and can lead to a sense of failure in trying to achieve it.

For most of history, life has been harsh in the countryside. Social mobility was difficult, wages low, many lived in tied houses with poor education, poor healthcare and isolation was a factor in the past as it is now.

Then in the Industrial Revolution people started moving to towns.

In villages people did know each other and care for each other, but relationships were not always good.

Now we have (comparably) better transport but in the government’s mind the countryside has become a place of leisure and retreat rather than primarily a place for producing food. Living in villages has become a sought after lifestyle and this has pushed house prices very high. Even though the rural population has declined overall, which would normally mean lower house prices, this is not the case now.

Around 6 million people live in all rural areas, and about 1 million in what is termed “sparse rural”.

Rural Britain is becoming middle class Britain in many areas.

There are real social problems and poverty in rural areas. Quote from Stuart Burgess - “the Rural Blanket can hide many pockets in its folds” – meaning poverty is often hidden and not all in one place. If you add all the tiny pockets of poverty together in terms of the countryside you would find a population the size of Birmingham living in severe poverty – but they are not all in one place so have less impact.

The word rural covers a multitude of contexts from suburban commuter villages to very spare rural.

Many early retired people are moving to rural areas and like to be part of the community. Many bring great skills of organisation with them – but often local people don’t want to be “organised” in this way, preferring existing ways of doing things. Some who move in really want to become involved, but others are really tired and need to recover. Some are quite wealthy but maybe time poor and are happy to give money to pay for church workers, which is good, but means they are not actually getting deeply involved personally.

There is a big difference between those who live and work in the rural areas and those who live in a village, but commute outside for work.

Many issues surround holiday homes. There are impacts on local businesses and services if houses are not permanently lived in. Sometimes holiday home owners are against local development and the purchase of second homes can add to upward pressure on house prices meaning it is more difficult for younger locals to live and work locally.

There are a lower proportion of younger people in rural areas. Children who are brought up in rural areas and leave to go to university find it difficult to come back as a result of lack of suitable career and housing opportunities. This is also affecting the succession in farming businesses.

However, the population of rural England is currently growing. Though the numbers of young people 18+ is less, the number of children 0-14 is growing. The Countryside Agency predict that the rural population will increase by about 4 million in the next few years, but this will be mainly in commuter belts around the larger towns and cities.

Services

There are fewer banks and more are closing. Post Offices are also declining.

Post Offices – like churches – are places where people meet, exchange news and the postmistress/master is likely to know much of what is going on in the community.

Pubs are also declining – or turning into “eateries”.

Currently the “Pub is the Hub” campaign – what about the “Church is the Hub”?

Broadband coverage can be very poor in rural areas with many “not spots”. The church can help with this with aerials in church towers and spires – See Wispire operating in Norfolk
<https://wispire.co.uk/>

Environmentally less travelling and more homeworking is a good thing but this is hindered by lack of connection. Lack of reliable internet access is a huge problem for farmers with more and more government reporting mechanisms and services available only online.

Children in rural schools can have higher academic results for a variety of reasons including smaller class sizes and the financial status of their families, but there are often longer travelling times and lack of specialist teachers resulting in less choice of options. For rural children, educationalists often want children to be in bigger schools with more options – but there are competing needs.

In some areas rural schools are becoming church schools because of the level of support they receive. Schools are very important centres of community. A good relationship between a church and its local school can help the church get back to the heart of the community.

Land and Agriculture

The number of people working in agriculture has declined. There used to be several people working on one farm – now it is more likely to be the farmer with maybe their son/daughter and a contractor with a herdsman/woman working across different herds as a speciality.

There is a mantra “Go big, go bust or diversify”.

In the UK we have some of the most efficient large farms in the world. The economics of small farm units are very hard to maintain at a viable level. There are many diversification success stories.

High tech farming is changing much also and again the UK is at the forefront of agricultural technology – but it doesn't work for everyone.

A no-deal Brexit could spell devastation for some farmers and farming sectors generally.

We need to be talking about how we can keep in touch with farmers post-Brexit. Levels of poor mental health are already very high and we need to encourage churches to ensure they know all the farmers in their parishes. The government has said there will be new subsidies but these will be time limited. There are pastoral concerns for the farmers, and food security questions to be looked at also.

Even though ploughing in January is less common – traditional services such as Plough Sunday and Rogation very much still have a point in the seasonal worship of the year.