

The Changing Face of Rural Church and Rural Ministry – Session 2 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

In the earliest days of Christianity there were probably no church buildings. From the 7th century onwards Celtic monasteries developed, then in the 8th century the Benedictine monasteries and abbeys and some very small parish churches.

In these times most of the prayer and care was coming from the monasteries, which were more like small towns with hospitals, schools and mental health care at the heart of Christianity.

From the Normans onwards there was a huge growth in the number of formal religious buildings, followed by a lull during the reformation and then the huge expansion of the 18th and 19th century churches.

So – the built church environment which looks like it has always been there, really hasn't.

Before the Reformation around 1 in 50 male adults and 1 in 40 female adults were in some form of religious life. Much of the land was owned by the monasteries and farmed for the people was given away in the Reformation. Yes – there was some corruption in the system, but, the monasteries also provided most of the healthcare.

During the Reformation the churches were probably in a worse state than they are today. Churches today are better looked after than ever before.

Christianity has survived on our islands in very different ways. God is much greater than our buildings. Are we focusing our faith on the God who inspired the buildings in the first place?

In the Edwardian era there were around 28 thousand stipendiary priests in the Church of England – now there are around 9 thousand. But even then there was not one vicar per parish.

Then, and before, there was the problem of absentee clergy where someone could receive the living but didn't have to do anything in the parish. A good stipendiary but absent clergyperson would pay a clerk to take care of the parish, but the situation became so bad that the government stepped in to make 1/5 of every non-resident clergy's living go to the relevant diocese to pay for a stipendiary curate.

Until comparatively recently, clergy had to be farmers, or have some other form of income, as there were no proper stipends.

For most of history, rural ministry was the thing you didn't want to be or do as a clergyperson.

The role of ministry has transformed over the past 100 years or so and now we also have Readers, SSMs, OLMs and retired clergy all working together.

How do we go forward to make sustainable rural churches? How do we proclaim Jesus in every community?

People remember the days when “the churches were full” – but going back in the records they weren’t. People are often remembering the big events and festivals. Before the Reformation this may have been different, but since the Industrial Revolution onwards this has not been true and the situation has been worse in urban areas than rural. Some churches had more seats than there was population in the community – so they never could have been regularly full.

There has been a decline in the rural population generally, so we should expect some change proportionately anyway.

Why we feel a sense of failure is because the Victorians pewed everything! Up to the Reformation there weren’t pews – people stood – or sat around the edges on benches if they were infirm but with the advent of longer sermons people needed to be able to sit down. It could be said that pews keep the people in their place while the clergy do the worship for us. We have a sense of failure because we can see all the empty seats and people not filling them.

Music – in the early days Christians didn’t originally have music in their worship. In the days of the early Father music was for the Jewish people, not for the Christians.

After the Reformation instruments gave way to metrical psalms and then with Evangelical renewal to organs and the Oxford movement to robed choirs.

We need to re-order our buildings because the empty seats look like failure – and they weren’t always there.

There never has been a golden age, but times of less people and times of more.

The 1950s represented a recent high point and we measure ourselves against this.

We need to re-imagine our church buildings, re-imagine our ministry and re-imagine or worship for today and today’s generation.

Questions/Discussion Points

Someone raised the question of statistical returns which may or may not measure the real picture in rural churches. Bishop Alan said that whilst there needed to be statistics, he would often ask churches “What statistics would you like to collect? What, in your context, do you think would show evidence of growth? What measures the quality of pastoral care? How do we measure how we share the gospel in word and action? Interesting question – what do we want to measure? PJD comment –

for rural churches perhaps participation as a percentage of the parish population would be a useful measure.

Pews may have developed our worship into a less participative “spectator” worship. How do we change and go forward from here?

Rural people can be some of the most flexible – if a farmer’s crop fails one year he will plant something different next year. We can be nimble and fleet of foot in our smaller rural churches.