

## **Growing Rural Churches – Session 3 of the Conference “Faith and the Future of the Countryside” with Bishop Alan Smith, held at Lee Abbey, Devon, 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019**

### **Notes from the lecture taken by Susanna Metz**

Reminded us of yesterday’s discussion that there was never a “golden age”

We must reimagine church for our people

—use the raw material we have for our mission today

God gives us things to deal with and enough grace, will and resources to build what he wants

Understanding the nature of the task of growing the rural church

—today the buzz word is “leadership”

—“what we need is more leadership” is what we hear

—leadership as a word is found very little in the scripture!

—NT is packed with language of farming, herding, and animals!

—Alan says what we need is more courses on agriculture, gardening, etc! It’s more the nature of the church

—we’re praying and working to build more community and family, extended family

—another key concept in the NT is shepherds and sheep.

—it’s not about bossing people around....you can’t boss plants and animals....it needs a much different style.

—Jesus after the resurrection is mistaken for a “gardener” (he told a great story about himself being mistaken for a gardener)

Think in terms of gardening and see the task differently

Where things go wrong is when folks come in from larger churches and contexts.....you can’t use the same ideas. We must encourage our clergy new to rural areas to walk around first and see what works.....what grows. We have to rethink what will “grow in our garden”.

Wander around other local churches to see what works for them.

Told a story about a new vicar who decided to have a *Back to church Sunday*. He mentioned it to a villager who said, “I didn’t know I ever left.” Sent a bad message. Better to have a *Come to Church Sunday*. A lot of different rural contexts as well as urban/rural – what works in the different rural contexts?

### **Building:**

—“See the building as an asset not a problem”. BAS said it sounds trite, but he said we need to have every church open every day. Go out to village and help them know the church is theirs. Not even a great message to have a note about where to find the key.....who holds the key!!! Statistics say there’s more damage done to locked churches than unlocked. However, he realises we do have to be aware of any drug problems etc.

—we have to get them suitable for use. That often means doing something with the pews if you can.

—we need to reconfigure things to see how we might be able to sit and meet. How we can provide warmth, light, facilities, etc.

—He said, “Don’t always give into conservationists!” hahaha.....go for it! Get them in on the beginning to dream with us.

### **Worship:**

—one of the basic problems....we put huge strain on the clergy and also when we build the rota around the availability of our clergy so we are building a structure for decline.

—we have to build a better structure so people in general KNOW when the service is. We treat visitors pretty badly. So, he suggests a way to have a service at the same time every week.

— Also why do we think a “normal” service will last an hour? Why do we decide we need to have 5 hymns with 6 verses? Where does that come from? He also talked about the pitch of hymns. Our voices are dropping. We need to look carefully at how we can make small group worship authentic without straining them to try to be a small big church.

### **Mission and Evangelism**

—historically there are too many public buildings in a village. He feels that in the next 100 years they will decline significantly. We may end up with one multi-purpose building. So.....since maybe the one building that won’t be knocked down because of its history, we might need to repurpose the church. He mentioned churches that have done this pretty well....shops, computer access, even police, etc. In various times our churches actually were much more multi-purpose. How can some rural churches have outreach to walkers and other tourists. More people are working from home. It’s not long before they want connection with others.....they might need computer help....they might crave gossip, coffee with others etc. Sooooo.....how can we take good advantage of this? It’ll be different everywhere.

### **Schools, Students, Youth Work**

—most of our Church schools (about 4000 across the country) are in rural areas

—the Head is key to a successful connection between school and church

—he has found very little connection between the “values, etc” that are taught but the idea that children are helped to find a personal connection with their faith. We might need to be more confessional.....not of course proselytizing. Values come from belief... we don’t celebrate them enough. He talked about the government “giving” us what values we should believe....not a good idea. He talked about one school where the head has helped them develop an appreciation for silence. The children came into assembly and sat in silence for 10 minutes!

—He said he wanted to set us free from feeling guilty about not having youth work all the time. You’ll have times when a group grow up, move away and your group collapses. It’s not useful to set up a big urban model of a continuous youth group or Sunday school organisation. We talked about ***Open the Book*** as a good connection.