

The Future of the Rural Church – Session 5 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 Susanna Metz

The Village Survival Guide. How rural communities can take on the future and including everybody in on the conversation. <https://www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/research/village-survival-guide>

Several preliminary thoughts:

—in rural ministry we’re in exciting times. Rural areas are changing—there’s a new excitement among those in rural ministry e.g. Bright Field Group, Growing the Rural Church, Shropshire Reaching Rural Youth Group, Fresh Expressions etc. Best way to do it is bottom up. What makes our area tick. “Tree Cathedral” “Forest Church”

—BAS said we can’t forget the traditional church. The danger may be that when we’re doing church we get caught up on the external expressions.....can happen in both contemporary and traditional expressions. We confuse the vehicle with the reality.....none of it will work unless it’s incarnation and relational. This can happen in any type of expression. We can get caught up in the externals. The heart of it must be living out of the faith....fundamental base of all misery.

—ecumenical dimension: We can no longer be imperialistic....we must work together....which church or chapel has the best venue for various things.

—at the heart of our renewal regardless of size is how we nurture prayer and a life of faith. He told the story about going to a rural church for Sunday service and found that a group were praying together off to the side.

—BAS diocese hired a woman to spend a year going around just talking to folks....completely confidential etc.....then she’d bring it all back to the diocese. He was amazed what he heard. There were amazing story of “growth” in a variety of iterations.

—in many rural areas working with the seasons is still a very powerful way of working with the community.....Harvest, Plough, Rogation, Lammas etc. Find ways to include what the community does in the worship.

Minister Model; Festival churches; Focal

Minister Model

—7th c. Clergy living together, but not in monastery. They’d go out then to their particular area on Sunday.

—parochial system developed because when bishops were looking at far flung areas, they wanted to make sure people were cared for so they drew the bounds and sent clergy to take care of that area.

—Today, we must stop being so parochial....we have to lean to be much more fluid. People suggesting minster again – clergy come together and are less isolated – live a rule of life and share the ministry of the whole area. Some places have tried it. However, BAS said he has questions....he’s heard a lot of the larger churches think it’s great, but he’s not heard the village folks saying anything but “are you kidding!” Still a clerical model apart – ministry needs to be relational and incarnational.

—he’s open to be persuaded, but wonders why they haven’t survived and why aren’t more doing it

Festival churches:

- some rural churches are so far flung it's hard to find church wardens, etc and too few congregations. Some are made redundant, some they try to sell off....but what do you do with the ones that heritage groups don't want, etc.
- in some cases, he says, churches need to be made redundant. It's a huge thing to let go of, but sometimes it's what you have to do.
- or you can make them Festival churches:
- provides a safety net. BAS went through who all needs to be contacted if you're going to have the discussions about making a church a F.C.
- then you decide when you'll want to use is (6 services a year is the usual); you need a Friends; Group; you have to figure out insurance, etc
- often villagers are often happy enough to be in a friends' group. BUT how often do you find a group who are willing to take charge of the hard work of keeping it going.
- BAS says his question revolves around the basis that Christian faith is sustained by regular worship. The way faith is imbedded in life is the practice of regular worship, hearing scripture, outreach and ministry...incarnational/relational!!! So, he has questions whether F.C. is just a way of slowly letting the faith disappear from the countryside.

So these two are questionable, but what IS the answer, he says. He thinks we have to look at how we empower to the maximum even Christian community and authorise them to find new ways forward, and have a slant on what Focal Ministry style will help.

"Leading One Church at a Time". Bob Jackson

<https://grovebooks.co.uk/collections/leadership/products/l-34-leading-one-church-at-a-time-from-multi-church-ministers-to-focal-ministers>

"Mission Shaped and Rural" Sally Gaze

<https://www.chpublishing.co.uk/books/9780715142806/mission-shaped-and-rural>

Focal Ministry:

—All the evidence shows that if we want the church to be effective it needs:

Pastoral care, worship, and teaching.

- right now our teams are too big – one minister can probably only provide this fully for 2 or 3 churches. Rushing about is not biblical or right.
- can we find someone to give consistency of worship?
 - who will be brought up through training
 - his diocese has trained worship leaders (not to preach however), and pastoral care teams
 - the folks are part of the communities and so know them – respected in the community and be present at church each week for continuity
 - they find folks who are good at social media things, so they can get the word out.
- so, we might say "every parish needs a full team"....you get problems here. Some folks in parishes might put themselves forward, because they don't really know themselves as well as they think they do and they shouldn't be sent forward.

- his advice is to go in, talk, listen, etc....to identify the people who are already more or less the focal ministers. Then we identify and train them. If you have a village where you don't have anyone, then you work with what you have on the ground.
- it need to be local, customised, and based on incarnational/relational faith. Will be unique in each place depending on people and context. Resist grand universal schemes.
- a question was asked then if there are focal ministers, what's the clergy do? BAS says clergy are still involved. It would look different though.

Question time:

BAS was asked about where a large evangelical church draws in the folks from the villages - is that minister model? BAS says no because minster model is where the clergy go OUT to the village churches. BAS said he's not sure what the answer is, but that often the difference in liturgical styles, etc will draw different folks. The village could be a place where the faith will grow in that particular style and draw folks there, too.

A woman asked about clergy who don't support what the laity in a parish are doing. BAS said you pray he/she might feel called someplace else. Clergy are not controllers, they should be enablers.

Another woman talked about the minster model and how in her area they're using house churches instead of the smaller churches....they come together for big services in the "minster" church. BAS said they rarely survive when it's based mostly on house churches.

Festival Churches in Diocese of Exeter need to be developed as part of overall Mission Action Plan for MC.