

## **Rural Officers Gathering**

**Launde Abbey, Leicestershire   November 2019**

As usual the gathering explored areas of rural life and the way that the Rural Church engages with the wider community. These notes show something of the range of ideas raised.

### **Social Action and the Faith communities, the GRA:CE Project**

Hannah from Theos is running a project exploring the connection between social action, discipleship and church growth using the following framework

- What does church growth look like in real life?
- How does social action help churches grow?
- How do people grow as disciples through social action?

The study offers qualitative and quantitative stories and statistics from 66 case study parishes looking at social action carried out by local Churches.

There are no definitive findings so far as the research is not concluded although there have been many initial conversations. Findings so far include

- Some Churches are growing despite the headlines
- Growth is in presence, depth and diversity not just size
- Growth is through engagement with local organisations

The research is finding that

- Social action is not just about material deprivation
- Projects which treat people with intrinsic worth are more successful in breaking down barriers
- Loneliness goes across socioeconomic boundaries

The research is continuing

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## **ARC – exploring rural isolation**

The Arthur Rank Centre have been developing a resource looking at rural isolation, exploring practical issues in this area and offering areas for theological reflection. It is noted that any response that a church will make will be contextually specific.

Questions that had been raised by the study include

- How can we encourage congregations to look more closely at the community, individuals and families around them?
- How might we as a Church be more friendly?
- How might we respond to lonely people in the congregation
- One group of hard to reach people which has been identified so far are those who commute into cities from rural areas.
- How to make links with chaplaincies in the area –
- Exploring ways to make rural/urban connect together
- How might we identify ‘pre loneliness’?
- How might we produce a local discussion starter?

An example of how this works in practice was given in a talk given by **Deacon Lorraine Brown** around her work in the Peak Park. Lorraine is working with churches and communities across the Park so as to provide space to meet and place for people to gather together for festivals and events.

## **National Rural Officers**

The national Rural Officers talked of their work at the ARC including

- Developing Festival churches for which an association of festival churches has been incorporated. This is not about mothballing churches but is an opportunity for renewing mission and ministry when congregations cannot sustain the building week by week.
- One of the things that has sparked debate is the Church of England strategic development fund which will fund projects in areas of a population of 100000 + unless there was a proven case for doing otherwise, many rural settings can!
- The question of how might we develop ecumenical process within all of these areas of concern for our communities?

## **Crispin Trueman CEO of CPRE, the Countryside Charity**

spoke about the changes that had taken place in CPRE (Campaign for the Protection of Rural England founded in the 1920's) recently as the organisation was exploring a new vision for rural life which would be similar but different from that which the CPRE has expressed during its 93 year history. In the 21st century CPRE is less about statutory issues and is

looking more to influence the planning system to make it work better work for rural communities.

There is a fundamental rethink with regards to CPRE as the organisation to re-purpose its mission and strategy as it seeks to work for and with rural communities to produce a vibrant countryside which is

- vital for everyone's wellbeing and mental health
- vital for nature and biodiversity

It is well known that farming changing, rural services are decline (eg pubs shops churches transport). Most, if not all government solutions are urban based and there is often lack of insight into rural life, needs and opportunities which CPRE is seeking to address.

CPRE recognise the interdependence of urban and rural areas. For example, what is the point of providing affordable housing when there are no jobs or transport associated with them? There is need for a living sustainable built environment, key to which is the planning system. CPRE is not about stopping housing but rather looking at housing as a holistic context.

Local Distinctiveness is important as is the need a well-cared for natural environment working towards a Zero Carbon countryside

There is a need to connect people and countryside which will give the opportunity for people to engage with the countryside and therefore to better care for it. Farming is significant here and the CPRE has published a report 'Why small farms matter' which can be found on the CPRE website.

We all need to explore how to can allow communities to thrive. We need a vision and an agenda for rural life, a joined-up approach between nation and local government, Government agencies and the Voluntary sector. The Government will have an important role exploring the need to balance institutional support and local action and control. Partnerships are vital so that local communities can do for themselves. The landscape has changed and charities have picked up things which used to be done by the Government or local authorities. A shared vision needs to be explored.

One area that CPRE is exploring is the development of County Farms. Such LA Owned farms are largely in decline but the time is now right to revisit how these farms offer opportunities for new entrants into the farming sector. There will be a report on this coming out from CRPE soon.

The rural context is not one thing but many which is a challenge of those who are in power don't get the range of rural contexts. How do we get the vision to be understood more by policymakers? Perhaps by using the following questions

- Which LENS does the policy makers look through?
- How do we measure deprivation?
- What about broadband – and lack of computer hardware?

- How might we tackle rural isolation?
- Discover how Rural deprivation impacts on different communities
- Explore the lack of understanding of rural complexity
- Look at ways of exploring rural mental health.

CPRE is a campaigning organisation which will be looking at hidden deprivation in the context of rural loneliness, closure of services and lack of transport. Within this framework though it is important to celebrate the possibilities. It was noted that we could be accused of underselling what is happening in rural church. Churches value their community and offer wellbeing opportunities through buildings and people, faith and worship.

We shouldn't be afraid of the political process but engage with it, by engaging our MP's so as to explore ways of creating thriving rural communities

The question was raised, 'Where is church in all of this?' Do people take the church seriously? How do we use buildings and resources? The church is on the ground in rural (as well as urban) areas and once we can speak with unity, knowledge and faith we can share with our rural communities something of deep and lasting significance.

### **Claire Maxim, CEO of the Arthur Rank Centre (ARC)**

#### **Claire talked of what ARC has to offer including**

- Training – germinate leadership – this year's cohort has just started. The Programme changes each year and the course is now residential. ARC is clear that we will not curtail access because of an individual's financial constraints – speak to Claire if this is the case
- The Rural ministry course is aimed from those moving into Rural Ministry 11th – 13 February 2020
- Rural mission Sunday is on 20th July 2020
- Country way Magazine
- Open the doors – accessible welcome – ARC have resources
- Worshipping together – how to give those who need to step in to lead worship the resources to do so – ARC have produced a resource
- Isolation and loneliness
- The ARC Conference 2020 will be on the 14th November Saturday in Coventry at the Welcome Centre – will include themed conversations.

#### **Things that ARC hope to do**

- Produce a resource to help Christians to make theologically informed choices around the food that they buy and eat. This is funded in part by the Saltley Trust
- Germinate enterprise will become a different name – Jerry will take the forwards
- Environmental stewardship
- Continue to Share good practice

- Continue to encourage rural churches
- Help churches to explore ways to improve and develop their community
- Find ways to improve Rural and Urban links
- Continue with Advocacy with Government and the Church at a national level

### **Work of the ARC**

- Production of resources
- Training
- Advocacy. The ARC can speak truth to power.... use the ARC and Claire to speak into the political sphere. ARC have a seat at the Rural Coalition meeting at DEFRA.
- Prayer and worship

### **Final session from Rural Officers**

Rural is complicated but all rural practitioners are doing something. Keep doing and keep telling ARC what we're doing in the following areas

- Rural stress (including clergy stress and isolation)
- The use of buildings
- Fragile church – work been published as a research report in RTA journal

We explored the pressures on rural churches and recognised the marks of a fragile church which include

- Financial pressure and pressure in resources
- Inability to replace churchwarden etc
- Too few volunteers
- No critical mass (number) of children
- Lack of clergy time for new (and existing) initiatives
- Tiny congregations often with large buildings to look after
- Relentless nature of keeping church going
- Make mistakes

More work would need to be done in this area in the future, but the conversation gave us a starting point

The final questions were around the challenges to the Rural community and rural church post Brexit

The next Rural Officers Gathering will be in November 2020.