

Growing the rural church

The challenges of rural ministry are addressed in a new report aimed at releasing the energies of clergy and lay people for mission in the countryside: Released for Mission – Growing the Rural Church. Sally Kimmis takes a look at its findings and recommendations and the implications for our Diocese.

Freshly-brewed church in Chedgrave

Xpressions Café is the fresh expression we have here in Chedgrave and it has three areas, three parts to it. The core is Xpresso, which is a café open from 10-12 with as much tea, coffee, juice, cake, Sunday papers, as you want – all free, come and go as you please.

Upstairs is Xpressions which is focused particularly on families, craft activities, songs, prayers, stories. And, in the church, we have Xplore which is in two parts at the moment. There's a discussion that happens every Sunday and then we invite everyone to come together for a final session in the church which is a kind of multimedia, alternative worship kind of approach.



Active Prayers in Xpressions

The café, Xpresso as we call it, is at the heart of everything in Xpressions Café. It is, it is a 'third place' if you like – it's like 'Perks' ('Central Perks' in Friends) or the bar in Cheers – it's the place where people can meet; it's neutral. And, quite

early on, we came to the decision that we would not do anything 'religious' in the café. In fact, we did for a time talk about it as a 'God-free zone' which, of course, is nonsense but it got the point across. You can invite anyone there and they will be 'safe' and the first value that we ever articulated was extravagant hospitality, so the tea, the coffee, the juice are all Fairtrade but they're also good. We have Sunday papers there so you can just come, have coffee, chat, or just sit on your own and read the papers and, if you want to do anything else, that's entirely up to you.

"Neither me, not my partner, before we arrived here were particularly religious," says one café- user.

At the recent Multi-parish benefice day, Canon Jill Hopkinson, the Church of England's National Rural Officer, gave a presentation on *Growing the Rural Church*. During the day, delegates were asked about their hopes and fears for the future and some of them are quoted here.

Amongst the Report's findings, we learn that one-fifth of the rural population is over the age of 65. Half are over 45. So, of course, our work with children, young people and young adults is important, but this demographic of an older population must inform our priorities for mission and ministry.

Further statistical analysis reflects on the differences (and some similarities) of church life in urban and rural areas. This includes such things as the balance of clergy deployment: stipendiary/non-stipendiary, male/female; and relative growth and decline in church attendance, including how the number of parishes in a benefice seems to affect this.

The Church of England is uniquely placed in that we have a continuing commitment to every community. We have an inherited presence of prayer in our church buildings and congregations

and we are called to worship, to pastoral care and prophetic witness. As individuals, we are embedded in our communities in ways that are just not possible in urban settings.

Most rural congregations, however, are small in number. We can exhaust ourselves by the complexity of servicing meetings, fundraising and maintaining our buildings. What can we do better by sharing our knowledge and experience, by working together across the benefice? Are there other 'management' structures that could be put in place, for example a single benefice church council with one set of officers?

One of the Report's nine recommendations urges "A thorough review and simplification of legal governance structures and the requirement for many officeholders within a multi-church group." Another recommendation calls for strategies for mission and ministry that include an intentional focus on mission and evangelism. This depends on lay people and clergy having their time and energy freed up from the demanding tasks of managing buildings and finance.

Contd. over

“Without fail, everyone in our church yearns for younger members.”

“We are excited about the future because we are a spirit-filled congregation – our approach/mission comes from the heart not the head.”

“I would like us to stop thinking of ourselves as single congregations and start thinking of ourselves as a benefice.”

“We have lost the ability to build relationships with the wider community and challenge people with the good news of the Gospel.”

“My hope is that each of the individual parishes will be more confident in their contribution to the whole.”

“We always kind of toyed with the idea but church never seemed for us because it was never a place you would actually go but it was just coming and actually having a place where you could discuss your views freely, listen to other people's opinions and seek guidance.”

Something like a fresh expression that we have here is a real delight. It allows parents to come along with their children, it allows people with no children to come along; it's a real coming

together of the community really and we're able to offer a much wider range of things than we could before. We have drawn people from across the churches in our Benefice within our community and there's just a greater freedom really in what we can offer and how we can help people engage with God, which is great.



'What Are You Wearing' in Xplore Together

I would challenge very seriously the notion that the rural church is dying. If you find ways to engage with people, perhaps that are culturally appropriate, people are interested. They want to explore, they want to come along, so we've found that a good number of people who wouldn't normally go to traditional church have come along to see what's going on; they're quite excited when you challenge them on their spiritual ideas and where they are. It's good.

The Revd Richard Seel and the Revd Alison Ball

You can see our video here:
www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/xpressions/oct14

Much of this resonated for me, as a relatively new incumbent of a rural benefice. There were many other things that struck me too, as both issues and opportunities. Here are a few of them: A quote from the *Growing the Rural Church* report:

“New initiatives are much easier to start at group level, but much harder to maintain, because the level of ownership at the early stages is much less.”

This stems from the particular allegiance and love for the local church, which is well placed and well understood. But we are part of something bigger; we have a wider responsibility if we are to survive and thrive.

If we focus solely on maintaining our traditional patterns only, we are constrained by limited resources, and a limited range of skills. Which leads us back to the question: What could we do better; how could we be more effective, if we drew on the wider pool of resources and skills?

Another quote from the Report:

“Are the churches ranged around the priest; or are they a group of churches served by one or more ministers?”

There’s a subtle, but important, distinction here. We are a long, long, way from ‘Father knows best’.

Leadership has to be a shared endeavour. The incumbent’s ministry is one of oversight and support. Another quote goes “the role of the priest today is to support the ministry of the Church, not to do it!” We need active, committed, mature Christians with time and energy to share in leadership.

Few of us in rural benefices have the benefit of paid administrative support. An improved system of administration is another of the Report’s recommendations. Jill Hopkinson’s view is that the role of Administrator is a missionary post – acting as the communications hub of the group

and releasing ministers’ time to more effective pastoral work, so important in rural communities.

It is my hope that the recommendations of this Report are tackled seriously, at national, diocesan and benefice level. We all need to work together with God’s help to make these aspirations a reality!

The Revd Sally Kimmis is Priest-in-charge, Foulsham benefice.



With thanks to Simon Fenn (*Children, Youth and Family Missioner*) and the Revd Sally Gaze (*Team Rector, Tas Valley and Diocesan Fresh Expressions Facilitator*)



See resources page opposite for details of how to get hold of the report.

“It’s very difficult when you’ve only got a half-time priest to put into action all the good ideas.”

“People – the church – are unwilling to respond to changing times.”

“My hope is that the church would be a place where people could flourish and learn about the God who we are called to follow.”

