

Sustaining Faith in the Future

a six sessions course for church councils or small groups

Introduction

It is 20 years since the Archbishops' Commission On Rural Areas published the report Faith in the Countryside. In the last two decades there has been much that has happened in the rural church and in rural communities for which we should be thankful.

- The recommendation that there should be a full time Church of England National Rural Officer has been implemented and exciting and pioneering work has been done by those who have held the post.
- The creation of a post of Rural Officer or Agricultural Chaplain in almost every diocese to serve the needs of rural communities and support mission and ministry taking place in the local area (also a recommendation in the report).
- Creative and innovative local projects serving communities in all sorts of ways – through the creative use of church buildings (for example for concerts, exhibitions and post offices); or services for the community (such as regular social opportunities, support for those who have lost their jobs, IT training etc.).
- Partnership working with local organisations at village and district level.
- New ideas for mission and ministry, particularly with children and young people and older people.
- The Arthur Rank Centre at Stoneleigh, Warwickshire is a focus for the national churches in their rural work. Training in rural ministry and multi parish work takes place regularly.
- The magazine Country Way continues to be an excellent resource for rural churches.
- The workbook 'Seeds in Holy Ground' is been a valuable tool for rural churches.

However, all in the garden is not rosy. There continues to be challenges for rural churches. This lent course is designed to help churches to identify and rise to their own particular challenges. It is being put together with the needs of small rural churches to the fore.

If it is simply run as a course that a group of keener church members come to, talk about and then go away from, then this course will have failed. It is more likely to produce long term benefits for rural churches if whatever group is engaged in these discussions is also the group that makes decisions for the church. For that reason it would be good if this course could be seen as an extension of the PCC's activities.

The sessions include a discussion as to what the local church should do. So that this course has lasting benefits for the church it would be good if the answers to those questions could be recorded and PCC's consider how those decisions can be implemented.

A word to other denominations.

Just as the original report was a Church of England report addressed to Church of England churches but something which was a source of insight and blessing to other denominations so too I hope this course, whilst addressing particularly Anglican concerns, will be something that other denominations will find accessible. Church of England terminology is used throughout, talking about PCC's etc, but please feel free to translate it into your own language.



Robert Barlow Agricultural & Rural Chaplain, Diocese of Worcester.

A few practical points (especially for group leaders)

The social side of a course

This is as significant as any other. A positive, welcoming atmosphere is important. Simple refreshments, tea, coffee, squash, biscuits... matter. They're probably better at the beginning of the meeting than the end (particularly if you have people for whom late evening drinks means a midnight visit to the loo!)

Starting the meeting

There are a variety of different activities. Choose which ever you think will work best with your group. You may like to use the same one each time if your group likes consistency, or you might like to ring the changes if your group likes variety. Some of the opening activities require more preparation by the leader than others.

Discussions

If you are in a larger group (8 or more) you may need to break into threes and fours for discussion

Meditation/Prayer

This may work best if done as silent prayer rather than people feeling that they ought to be saying something. Don't be afraid of quite lengthy silences, 10 minutes or more. If you are leading the group then it may be helpful for the group if after suitable lengths of quiet you encourage them to pray/meditate on the next bullet point listed. Agree how the prayer/meditation is to finish, e.g. "At the end I'll say "Amen" so we know we've finished."

Questions for possible action

Probably best done as a whole group.

Opening activities.

Refreshments at the beginning give an opportunity for late arrivals to turn up without disrupting the meeting, but beware of allowing too much "drift" – if you do you may find that you get later and later as the weeks go on! Choose one of the activities – either the same each week or change them around- to start the meeting. People coming may well have had busy days and their concerns may encroach on the meeting if they are not put to one side.

- a. Each person has a small stone. Have a small cross somewhere central in the room. Spend five minutes thinking about the day so far and any particular person/situation on your mind. At the end of the five minutes place the stone by the cross, representing placing the concern in God's hands. At the end of the evening people *may* choose to pick up the stone.
- b. After a minute or two of silence, each person has up to a minute (which should be timed – some people find it difficult to be concise) to talk about:
 - Something good that has happened to them that day
 - Something good they are hoping will happen to a friend the next day
- c. Spend ten minutes as a group reflecting on an icon, other religious artwork (there are some very good resources in "The Christ we Share" from USPG/Methodist Publishing), flower arrangement or other visual focus.
- d. In silence, spend five minutes with your hands open and palms facing downwards mentally going through the things on your mind you want to let go of. Then spend five minutes with palms facing upwards as a sign of your willingness to receive from God.
- e. Spend ten minutes listening to some de-stressing music – not necessarily religious, but it could be.

Session One – Buildings: Blessing or Burden?

The roof leaks. The floor is subsiding. The windows are perishing. The heating is ineffective, the pews are uncomfortable. The “Heritage Lobby” object to each and every alteration that we try to make. It is taking all our resources just to maintain this outdated pile of stones. Money which could be used to pay Parish share, heating bills, fund mission initiatives..... is being swallowed up in architects fees. Surely the best thing we could do is to employ a diocesan arsonist!

The church was built to be the centre of community. It was designed to house village activities. The building tells the story of the village not just through the monuments to the great and good from the Victorian age but from the very stones themselves cut from a local quarry. The churchyard is raised above the level of the nearby road because it quite literally embodies the history of that place. The building is where people brought their hopes, fears and joys for countless centuries. The challenge to the church is to recover something of the ancient intention for the building. So how can this be done?

Bible reading

Read Psalm 84. It can be dangerous to make a direct leap from what happened with the Old Testament Temple and conclude that the same ought to happen with our Parish Church today! But it's a useful starting point.

From this Psalm we see that the Temple was a place:

- of beauty - “How lovely is your dwelling place...”
- where God is - “How lovely is your dwelling place...”
- of belonging for all, even wildlife! –“Even the sparrow...”.

In the time of Jesus’ ministry it was also a place:

- of encounter with people – remember Mary and Joseph’s encounter with Simeon and Anna at the time of the Presentation of Christ (Luke 2 21ff)
- of teaching, discussion and debate – think of the boy Jesus at the Temple debating with the teachers (Luke 2 41ff) or the adult Jesus’ words “Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching...” (Mat 26,55)
- of exploitation. Jesus’ criticism of the traders when he drove them out was not about trade, but that they had turned what should have been a house of prayer for all nations into “a den of robbers” (Mat 21,12ff)

Discuss

Talk about

- places where you experience beauty, the presence of God, belonging, encounter with people, discussion, teaching, debate...
- the temple was supposed to be a place which met human need for belonging to God and neighbour, yet it had lost sight of its original purpose and become perverted into a place of exploitation. Did the church with its memorials to the rich and its larger more comfortable pews for the squire connive with an exploitative system? Are there other ways church buildings have or still do reinforce exploitation or exclude people who are different?

Meditation/Prayer

- give thanks for places where you have experienced beauty...
- ask forgiveness for the times church buildings have reinforced exploitation and exclusion.

Questions for possible action

1. What is the Church path like? Is it overgrown with overhanging branches or is it open and inviting?
2. Notice Board – How do people know what is and isn’t happening in the church? Where is it? Who can see it? If the notice board is inside a locked porch that effectively sends a negative signal to the village community – what is happening is for us, not for you. The notice board at the boundary of the property with up to date information and avoiding churchy language, helps to see the building as belonging to them.
3. Is the building left unlocked? Research indicates that there are more thefts from locked churches than unlocked and generally the Ecclesiastical Insurance is happy for buildings to be unlocked. A locked door gives the message that the building belongs to the vicar and congregation, a place of exclusion not inclusion. An unlocked door gives the message that the building belongs to the whole community. Valuable candlesticks, crosses etc can be locked away in the vestry or nearby house. If the church is to be a blessing it needs to be “owned” by the local community.
4. Is the door easy to open on well oiled hinges or does it require perseverance, skill and knowledge in order to be able to open it?

5. What about when you are inside? Is there something to tell visitors that they are welcome? People do visit village churches for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes for the sake of the architecture, sometimes trying to trace family history, but looking at visitor books what they so often find is peace, tranquillity and stillness, a place of refreshment and renewal. Are there resources to help visitors pray? What about some visual resources (icons or the like) for migrant workers or others for whom English is not their first language?
6. And outside? Can the churchyard be a place for “the sparrow to find her nest” and the richness of biodiversity that is part of God’s creation?
7. Back inside again, can the building be a place for the village to meet? There are church buildings that host Post Offices, Shops, and all sorts of community activities. What could you do to make that happen? How could you ensure it did not become exploitative? Have a look at the Building Stories.
8. Money! Last on the list (though I guess some may be tempted to start at the bottom and work up!!) If the building is there for the congregation to worship in, then the congregation should pay for its upkeep. If it is there to meet the wider community’s need then experience shows the wider community is happy to help with the bills. A “Friends of” scheme will work if the building itself is a friend to the community. That’s in the stories too.

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

We love the place, O God,
 wherein thine honour dwells;
 the joy of thine abode
 all earthly joy excels.

Building Stories

The Friends of St Nicholas Church (FOSN) was set up in response to a request from the Rector following an electrical failure in the church building that effectively closed it until a temporary repair could be carried out. The church has lighting but not heating following the temporary repair.

The problem did not stop with the immediate repairs though. The last Quinquennial Report identified £50,000 of work that needed doing more or less straight away urgently. Three years later, none had been done

Setting up the charity was very simple and the Charity Commissioners were very helpful. The whole process only took about two weeks from our initial online application.

Shortly after the setting up of the FOSN a local electrician said he would do the immediately required electrical work on the church “at cost” so reducing an estimated bill from £20,000 to £12,000. The PCC already had sufficient money to cover this and set about organising the Faculty necessary to start the work.

The FOSN have received to date about £5,000 from an appeal to villagers, receipts from a sponsored London Marathon run, a donation from a sports club and the proceeds of a raffle at a village event. Landfill Tax credits have promised a grant for £20,000. We still have plenty of other fund raising ideas not acted on yet too.

So six months after our first meeting six complete novices, who have met five times for about one and a half hours each meeting and are now in receipt of, or have been promised, half the funds needed.

Maybe we just got lucky with the timings of meetings and the people we talked to but it has certainly showed us what is possible with a bit of effort

In 1285, Edward 1 granted the village of Shipbourne permission to hold a weekly market. The last shop in Shipbourne closed in 1981 and some of the local farmers who had diversified their businesses needed more outlets to sell their produce. The Vicar decided to look into the idea of a Farmers’ Market inside the church. It took 18 months from initial idea to come to fruition, but first market held May 2003.

The objectives were to:-

- Create a service for our community
- Support local farmers, producers and craftsmen
- Raising funds for relevant farming charities at home and abroad.

The administrative hurdles to overcome included:-

Health and safety, trading standards, insurance, environmental health and provision of toilets. The Grade I listed church did not have any toilets, but next door pub opened theirs to people visiting the market. Few stalls in Church Approach, the rest are inside the church. Regular stalls now include two greengrocers, local meat, homemade pies, smoked fish, pickles and preserves, cheese and freshly baked bread. Boards are laid across the pews. The weekly Thursday am market attracts around 150 people each week right through the winter. Provides a valuable service to local people who do not have access to their own transport and provides another outlet to hard pressed farmers.

In 2005, they were the winners of the Taste of Kent Award for the best Farmers Market in the County, and in 2007, one of the finalists in the BBC Good Food Awards.

Session Two – Round pegs and square holes

It's the first PCC meeting after the annual church meeting. We struggled at that to find church wardens and deanery synod representatives and now it is time to find all the other office holders that the PCC seems to need, Deputy Wardens, Secretary, Treasurer, Village Hall Representative, Person to be responsible for Child Protection, Person to be responsible for protecting vulnerable adults, Benefice Council Representatives,... The list seems to go on and on. For small congregations it can seem that the structures were designed by people whose only experience was of large churches or designed for a time of limitless volunteers with limitless time and energy. So, what to do?

Bible reading

Read Deuteronomy Chapter 1 verses 6-18

Unrealistic expectation of one person is nothing new. Moses and the Israelites had to find a new way of filling his role. Today there may be unworkable demands on clergy, churchwardens, PCC secretaries... Clergy speak of impossible burdens. So do lay people. God's solution for Moses and the Israelites was to find a right balance. Jesus spoke about his yoke being well fitting (Mat 11, 30)

Discuss

Talk about

- What expectations do you have of the vicar, churchwarden, PCC secretary....?
- What are the expectations of parishioners- the diocese of these people?
- What is realistic?
- Who else needs to be involved - but don't let it become a grumbling session that "they" (young people, newcomers, the Diocese....) aren't interested

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for the people who have had important roles in your life and who have helped shape your understanding and experience of God
- Ask forgiveness for unrealistic expectations you may have had of others
- Pray for strength to deal with other people's expectations of what you should do. Pray for wisdom to understand God's expectations of you.

Questions for possible action

- With any post be clear about what it is that people are being asked to volunteer for. I met one person who had been a church warden for a year. Did she, I asked, know what the legal definition of her church duties was. No, she replied, it would be useful to have a job description or clear list of tasks. Without getting into the legalistic administrative paperwork burden so beloved by civil servants, there is still a lot to be said for people clearly knowing what it is they are being asked to do – and not do.
- Can the job be split and broken down into smaller parts so that it can be shared and become a smaller task for more people? If, in your church it has traditionally been the role of the church warden to set up for services (though there is actually no reason why this should be the case) could that part of the job be taken on by someone else.
- If it is impossible to fill some posts does it matter? Be honest about what can't be done as well as what can be done. If, for example, if it is not possible to get a Deanery Synod Representative, is it possible to find out what is happening at Deanery Synod in some other way? Is it possible to get the minutes of the meeting sent to the PCC secretary who can then keep the council informed of important matters or share a representative with another parish?
- Are the jobs worth doing anyway? Often people don't volunteer for roles if the roles are tedious and uninspiring. On the other hand meetings that are interesting and rewarding and energising are more likely to attract volunteers. Perhaps you are supposed to have a PCC representative on a Benefice Council, Deanery Social Action Committee, Village Hall Management Committee... Those committees may have had a valuable role when they were set up, but have they become moribund, tedious and dull? Has anyone actually told the committee? There will be those who have been on it since it was formed who will be upset to be told it's dull, but the chances are that there will be others who have exactly that view

that it is extremely tedious. It will never reform itself into something useful if, out of a sort of sanctified politeness, people never say anything.

- What can be shared in the benefice? It may be that each PCC needs to have a Child Protection Representative, for example, but the issues are likely to be the same across the whole of the benefice. Can one parish take responsibility for leading on this issue with the representatives from the other parishes taking a secondary role?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

Lord our God

You have chosen ministers to serve you in your church,

And have given us a perfect example

In the person of your Son;

Pour your blessing upon us your servants

That each in our vocation and ministry

May glorify you

Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Session Three – Make a joyful noise to the Lord

St Peter tells us that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his glorious light. (1 Pet 2 9ff) but on a cold Sunday morning with a wheezy organ, a coerced arthritic organist, a handful of people scattered around a barn of a building we may feel anything other than chosen, royal, holy and glorious!

Bible reading 1 Corinthians 13 26-40

The problem for the Church in Corinth was that their worship was chaotic and that is what St Paul was trying to get them to address. (All the stuff about women can be seen in this light. The church was still probably following the synagogue pattern of worship with women at the back and men at the front , so the “women should keep silent” injunction is perhaps best understood as saying “don’t shout from one end of the building to the other to ask your husband about the dinner – wait till you get home!!!)

But in the chaos (which Paul condemns), there is a complementarity in worship which Paul does not condemn. One person brings a hymn, another an instruction, another a word of prophecy, others (but not too many says Paul) a word in tongues. The picture is of all having a role to play. Worship is not a spectator sport. It is participation.

The word “liturgy” comes from two Greek words and means “the work of the people.” Unfortunately it became the performance of the parson. Before the Victorian age worship in rural churches would often be led by the parish clerk and accompanied by the village band. The Victorian clergy saw themselves as experts and modelled worship on cathedral practice. They sacked the village band and installed organs. There were neat rows of pews. People could see the parson, but only the back of the head of the person in front. What had been the offering of worship by the community to God became the offering to the community of worship by the expert. The order that St Paul wanted was there, but the participatory nature of worship was lost. The laity were reduced to the role of spectator whose presence, or absence, was largely irrelevant.

Bible reading 1 Corinthians 9 19-23

Here Paul talks about how he enters in to different cultures for the sake of the gospel. Rural worship should be culturally distinctive in two particular ways.

1. Traditional rural people are in contact with creation and the seasons. There should be an engagement with the seasons of the year:- Plough, Rogation, Lammas and Harvest. Hymns, prayers and sermons at these times benefit from predominately relating to God the Creator
2. Part of rural culture is to do with size. Rural churches tend to be small. Teachers and University Lecturers complain that their classes get too big and that say learning is better in a seminar than a lecture. Small congregations give an opportunity for more intimate worship and explore different ways of learning together during worship.

Discuss

Worship should be orderly, participatory and culturally relevant. Have a look at the worship stories, and talk about

- Without a return to the chaos St Paul condemned, what can be done so worship is genuinely participatory?

Worship Stories

One church periodically asked congregation members to choose their favourite hymns – up to twenty per person. The combined collection served two purposes. It meant that the church knew what hymns people liked that were not in the hymn book and for which they produced a supplementary booklet (copyright need not be expensive). It also meant that every Sunday some of the hymns would be chosen from the collection. Hymns were no longer solely the vicar/organist’s choice.

When Common Worship was published a church wanted to have the benefits of the seasonal material but without the expense of the complete (black) book for every worshipper and all the page turning that would involve. They had an open group from the congregation who looked at the different seasonal material, the different prayers of consecration and any other alternatives. They produced a series of booklets, a green one for ordinary time, a yellow one for Easter, a purple one for Lent and Advent which gave variety with the changes of the seasons. What went in and what was left out was determined by that group from the congregation (of which the vicar was one member).

A church wanted to pray for the whole village. They had a rota so one street was prayed for one month, another the next. They would drop a note through the letterboxes of the street telling residents they were going to be prayed for the following month and inviting requests for prayer. These could quietly be left at the back of church – the building was not locked.

A church developed a “seminar” rather than “lecture” style of sermons. The role of the preacher was to direct discussion and to make sure not too many red herrings or pet hobby horses appeared!

Another Church identified all the roles that its members had in other village organisations. It then used that as a basis to pray for those community organisations and their events.

- If worship is to be the offering **of** the community not the offering **to** the community, how can/should the community be involved in planning the pattern of services, selection of hymns, forms of liturgy? How does bringing in a retired priest, reader or other worship leader from outside the community fit with worship being the offering of the community? Other than voting with their feet, how do the congregation have a say about worship?
- How does your church's worship relate to God as Creator? Is the reason "All things bright and beautiful" remains popular because of its focus on creation? What other creation hymns do you sing? A hundred years ago, before the Parish Communion movement, most churches main Sunday service would have been Matins. Mainly now it is a Eucharist, which focuses on the redemptive work of Christ. How can we re-emphasise God's creative work which precedes redemption?
- How do you take advantage of the opportunities of being small?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for those who have participated in worship in your church over the years
- Pray for a greater participation in worship

Questions for possible action

- How can we worship when numbers are small and when the vicar or reader is conducting services all over the place?
- What are the alternatives to the Sunday gallop or grumbling about congregations because they don't travel
- What/how much can/should congregations do on their own?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

The love of God has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

We dwell in him and he in us.

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his name,

make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him,

and speak of all his marvellous works.

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty,

who was and is and is to come.

Session Four: Sing Choirs of Angels

Virtually all churches are now part of a larger group sharing their vicar with a number of others and the vicar quite possibly living at some distance away. How are rural churches to work when they are part of a group of three, four or five, or sixteen, seventeen or eighteen?

Bible reading Revelation chapter 1, vv 1-6 & chapter 2 v 1

In his book "Unmasking the Powers" Walter Wink has a chapter about "The Angels of the Churches". Drawing on the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation, he suggests that it is helpful to think of churches having an "angel" that somehow represents and shapes the character of the church.

That "angel" will be shaped both by the physical environment, the condition and comfort of the building and churchyard, by the current membership of the congregation and by the church's history – the influences of those people who have gone before. One Baptist Minister I knew told me that the most powerful personality in her church was the widow of a former Minister. The former Minister had been dead for decades. The widow too had herself been dead for a number of years, but if Mrs so and so wouldn't have liked it then whatever was suggested still didn't happen.

Another church had years with a leaking roof, crumbling stonework, peeling paint, rotten windows and subsiding floor. The churchwarden pursued any and every imaginable source of grant funding. That, together with some fundraising events, enabled the PCC to get the problems put right. It transformed the atmosphere of the church and the angel went from being depressed and fearful to confident. Even after the churchwarden moved away, the PCC had a positive "can do" attitude towards its mission.

Those disparate characteristics go together to make the character or the angel of the church. As with people, the angel of a church may be depressed, despondent, angry, optimistic, glad, happy... The characteristics of the church will shape the behaviour of the people in them.

Discuss

Talk about

- What shapes the "angel" of your church?
- How does your church's angel shape your and other members' behaviour?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for all the things that have shaped your church's angel in a positive way.
- Ask forgiveness for the negative aspects of the angel.
- Pray for a positive "can do" angel in the future

What happens when a group of churches are brought together in a benefice or team?

The image that I find helpful is to think of a choir of angels. In a choir there are times when all the people are singing in unison but the music is actually much more interesting when the choir breaks into parts and starts to harmonise. The overall piece of music is one where the parts within it are rich and varied. So if that applied to a multi parish benefice then the important thing is for the churches to work out what their part in the overall piece of music is.

A choir made up entirely of basses would be tedious as would a choir made up entirely of sopranos. So for your church within the benefice or team that it is a part of, what are the things that your church is good at and what are the things that are working well elsewhere that you don't need to do, but that you could encourage people from your village to go to if that meets their particular needs?

Perhaps your church has a strong traditional music tradition and is well placed to be known for the way that the Book of Common Prayer, Matins and Evensong is part of its life. Perhaps your church runs an excellent summer club for children. If the neighbouring church runs excellent Taizé services is that something that you from your village could support or encourage others to go to? Choirs enjoy coming together with other choirs from time to time, so what can your church share with in the deanery, diocese or with other denominations?

Questions for possible action

1. What is your church's part in your benefice/group? What do you do well? What can you offer to others in the group?
2. What are the other churches' parts in your group? What do they do that you would benefit from?
Are there other denominations that you need to be in harmony with?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

Angel-voices ever singing
round thy throne of light,
angel-harps for ever ringing,
rest not day nor night;
thousands only live to bless thee
and confess thee
Lord of might.

Session Five. A pilgrim people

A church organist was at a training session encouraging people to be aware of some of the better new church music. Toward the end of the session he was heard to comment, "It's like the words of the hymn. 'Change and decay in all around I see' It's all change and decay, change and decay."

It is a truism that the only constant in society today is change, but it's true never the less. It's tempting to want there to be an unchanging church (even if we never go to it) that is a bastion of stability in a world in turmoil. But it's not possible and even if it were, it would not be beneficial.

Bible reading Genesis 11, 27 – 12,9

God calls Terah to go Canaan but he stopped at Haran and settled there. He disappears from the story of faith. Abram responds to God's call to journey and becomes Abraham, the Father of Faith. Journeying means change. It means travelling light. It means using something at one stage of the journeys and then putting it aside when it has served its purpose.

That is challenging for us because journeying into something new is, by definition, travelling into the unfamiliar. The Israelites travelling from Egypt wanted to return (Exodus 16,2) because the past is familiar territory. Even if it was not much fun, at least we survived in the past and so it feels safer than an unknown future. But Terah got stuck, and we are called to be a pilgrim people.

What is there that you might stop doing that were once doing, a good idea at that time but no longer serve their original purpose or don't work as they used to? Being a pilgrim people it is about putting things down as well as about picking things up. If prayer book matins is a real struggle but your church is good at doing something else, then why not give up matins and encourage those people for whom it is important to enjoy it at a neighbouring church while you get on with your Iona services. If you used to have a fete but now organising the church fete is a drain on your resources that doesn't repay the effort and there are very good fetes close by, then why not concentrate instead on what you can do.

Discuss

Talk about

- What are the things from the past that you have valued that it might now be time to lay aside? (e.g. Sunday Schools, BCP Matins, Organists...)
- God is sovereign and he is calling fewer people into ordained ministry than in the past, but He has called a large numbers of lay people into all sorts of exciting roles. What does that say about the inherited role of clergy? What are the implications for future patterns of the ministry of the whole church, lay and ordained?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for all that is good in the church's past.
- Ask forgiveness for reluctance to embrace an unfamiliar future.
- Pray for wisdom to follow God's leading.

Questions for possible action

1. Make a list of things from the past that God is calling you to put to one side
2. Make a list of things that you think he might be calling you to pick up for this stage of the journey
3. How will you communicate that with the wider parish and benefice, and manage the inherited expectations
4. Might some formal service of thanksgiving for whatever you are leaving to one side help you and the parish to move forward?
5. What about a service of preparation and prayer as a new activity starts, or of thanksgiving for past achievements as an activity is laid aside?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

He who would valiant be
'gainst all disaster,
let him in constancy
follow the Master.
There's no discouragement
shall make him once relent
his first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim.

Who so beset him round
with dismal stories,
do but themselves confound -
his strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might,
though he with giants fight:
he will make good his right
to be a pilgrim.

Since, Lord, thou dost defend
us with thy Spirit,
we know we at the end
shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away!
I'll fear not what men say,
I'll labour night and day
to be a pilgrim.

Session Six. The dreaded “E” word.

If there is one word that is likely to send shivers of fear down most rural congregations it is “evangelism.” This session looks at what evangelism is – and isn’t– and helps think about what will work where you are.

“Evangelism” may conjure up pictures of big events with large crowds, emotive speakers, loud music played on guitars, appeals to come forward, invitations to come to church, hands waved in the air, people describing how completely immoral they were and how they have been unbelievably transformed....

However realistic that picture may or may not be of evangelism today, it bears little resemblance to evangelism as the bible portrays it.

Bible reading Luke 10, 1-12

Various things to note from Jesus’ instructions to the Seventy-two that we would benefit from

- They don’t go alone but in pairs. Evangelism, in this case, is a shared activity.
- They go. They don’t invite people to come to them. They go to where people are.
- Evangelism is small scale. Jesus doesn’t say “rent a stadium...” but “...enter a house...”
- The evangelists are received as guests and respect their hosts. “...eat and drink what they give you...” They are to allow their hosts to meet their needs and are not to complain if the food isn’t what they expected
- They are sent with a message of news, “The kingdom of God is near.” What the hearers do with the message is between them and God, but Jesus doesn’t send the seventy-two to voice opinions or tell people what they ought to do.
- Evangelism is inextricably linked to action and is not just words. The sick being healed is a sign of the kingdom that is announced. The phrase attributed to St Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel always. If necessary use words,” reminds us that actions are integral.
- There appears to be a complete lack of “follow up.” Not one of them gets signed up for a Christian Basics course!

Bible reading Acts 1 7&8

“You will be my witnesses...” “Witness” is a legal term and a witness simply tells what he or she has seen or heard. It is not up to a witness to try and interpret their evidence. That is a matter for the jury assisted by the Judge and the Counsels for the prosecution and defence.

Discuss

Talk about:-

- “The kingdom of God is near” –Mission has been described as seeing what God is doing and joining in. Where do you see signs of God’s kingdom of justice, belonging, forgiveness, healing, creativity, reconciliation...being established in your village? How can you join in?
- What is the difference between “out reach” and “drag in”? How as a church do you engage with people where they are physically, emotionally & spiritually?
- What is the equivalent for us to be receiving hospitality from people we are among and respecting them as “hosts”?
- Which of the Evangelism stories fit with the picture of evangelism above? Which do you think you might be able to do?
- Who is it that told you the good news that the Kingdom of God is near? What happened to you so that you came to believe it?

Meditation/Prayer

- Spend some time giving thanks to God for those people who have shaped your faith
- Spend some time praying your faith will continue to grow and develop
- Spend some time praying for someone important to you, that their faith may develop

Questions for possible action

- What from the Evangelism stories do you think would work in your village?
- What do you think you could do?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

Thy kingdom come, Thy will
be done,
On earth as it is in heaven

Evangelism Stories

- There was a lady who had been brought up as Christian and had not had a particularly easy life. Now in her 60s life was good but still presented her with struggles – her husband was disabled; her son was in the middle of a messy relationship break up... She worked as a cleaner. She regularly attended a quiet traditional midweek communion service. She used to say about it, “It gives me such a feeling of peace – I’m not sure how I would cope without it.” That was being a witness. No one could contradict her, not even a most militant atheist could tell her she was wrong.
- A church was good at catering, so they held “Food for Thought” suppers. Twice a year they would hold a series of suppers in the village hall – one a fortnight for six weeks. The suppers were simple and inexpensive. Diners could bring their own wine. At the end of each meal there was an after dinner speaker, almost always a lay person talking about their work, how their faith affected it and the issues they faced.
One speaker was a farmer, talking about faith that when you plant something it will grow – and that there will be a market for it.
Another was a printer who touched on the dilemma of being asked to print pornographic (but legal) material. Should he turn the job down – other firms would print it – and risk his employees being out of work.
Another was a trainer with a large bank who talked about his and the bank’s role in developing people’s full potential
After some initial hesitation among non-churchgoers the suppers became well supported. When problems in Afghanistan were bubbling up, the Church provided “A Flavour of the North West Frontier” – an evening using Afghan recipes and music with a speaker who had worked in Afghanistan with the Church Mission Society talking about Afghan culture.
By no means did all those who came to the suppers end up in pews (though this did coincide with a period of church growth), but they all had food for thought and an appreciation that faith has relevance to “ordinary” life.
- A church that would have run a mile from the idea of doing door to door evangelism was very happy to go carol singing. Having the advantage of serving a small village they sang carols door to door for the whole village in early/mid December. They collected not for the Church but for a local charity and they gave all the houses a simple Christmas card with Christmas greetings and details of opportunities for worship in both the Church of England and Non Conformist churches.
- Unable to staff regular children’s activities and with only a few children in the village, a church ran a children’s Christmas activity session in the village hall. Children did craft work, heard the Christmas story, sang Christmas carols, ate mince pies... The craft work then decorated the church windows at the village carol service the following week and children brought decorations they had made to hang on the tree.
- Other churches run similar activities for Good Friday, Mothering Sunday or on a monthly basis. For one, Halloween was a wonderful opportunity as there is nothing inherently occult about apple bobbing and pumpkin lanterns with crosses are just as appealing to children. A “Festival of Light” can be lots of fun, and many parents are glad to have something other than “trick or treat” for their children to go to.

And finally

There are all sorts of resources available to you to help, including,

Diocesan Officers

We don't sit in ivory towers of Diocesan Offices. We are here to help PCCs in their mission. Don't worry about ringing up and don't worry about not knowing which one is responsible for the issue you want support with. If you phone the "wrong" person we'll put you in touch with the appropriate one.

Arthur Rank Centre

www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk - The home of the National Churches' rural officers has lots of experience and resources, including:-

- Country Way

This is an excellent magazine published three times a year and full of practical examples of what has worked elsewhere, reviews of recent books so you know which ones are and are not worth reading, worship resources... The magazine perhaps works best when three or four people in a congregation subscribe and can suggest to a PCC that it should think about doing something from the magazine.

- Worship and other resources
- Training for your vicar!

Arthur Rank Centre runs training for clergy in both Rural Ministry and how to run Multi Parish Benefices. Clergy say it's difficult to attend the courses (they are both then inside of a week) because of the demands of busy parishes. Can you free up your vicar so he/she can go on the courses?

Rural Theology Association

www.rural-theology.org.uk RTA provides an excellent journal and local groups for lay and ordained people.

Rural Evangelism Network

www.ruralmissions.org.uk has expertise in rural evangelism.