



Church growth in rural communities



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Telling a new story

It is time to tell a new story about the rural church. A story that is honest but also hopeful. Rural churches can and do grow in terms of discipleship, numbers and service. The prevailing narrative though is one of decline and closure. This is not the case, as rural churches have a very similar likelihood of seeing growth in numbers as urban churches.¹

The rural church makes up around two-thirds of Church of England parishes and churches, with 40 per cent of regular attendance.² This amounts to more than 10,000 Anglican churches for the rural population of England of 9.2 million people, or roughly one church per 1000 people. This figure drops to one church per 650 people, if you add in the estimated 4000 churches of other denominations in rural areas. Rural churches are by their very essence, therefore, serving much smaller numbers than market towns, cities and large conurbations. Congregations will inevitably be smaller, but are likely to be a larger proportion of the population than their urban counterparts. This applies not just to the regular congregation, but to the wider worshipping community and engagement with the community as a whole.

Despite the fact that ordained ministry is often spread thinly over large multi-church groups, it is unsurprising that ministry costs more to provide in the countryside.³ Everything costs more to deliver in rural England: education, health and social care, public transport, broadband, financial services, etc., so we should not be surprised when this also

applies to the Church. However, the local church is often the last remaining open public building within many villages and in some places, the last service still present, with any form of trained or supported representative.⁴ The church building and graveyard often provide a spiritual heart for the community immediately around it, particularly if loved ones have been recently laid to rest there.

However, contemporary rural communities are not the bucolic idyll that they continue to be perceived to be by many. Agriculture plays only a small part in rural economies, employing vanishingly small numbers of people overall. Many villages and hamlets within reasonable reach of large centres of employment or stations with good rail services are home to large numbers of commuters. House prices can be out of reach to those on even reasonable incomes. Schools are usually good and households move into villages for many reasons, often to be able to engage with a smaller community where roots can be put down and lives built in a beautiful environment, at least at the weekend. Rural congregations may well have a higher average age than some urban ones, with limited numbers of children, but may also be lively, deeply engaged with community life and looking outwards for mission. Others may be turned in on themselves, focused only on survival: keeping the building up and open, and paying the parish share. In these diverse rural contexts, how is growth possible and what form might it take?

NOTES

1. F Tweedie, *Going Deeper: Church Attendance Statistics and Clergy Deployment* (2016), pp. 9–15. Available online at www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Going_Deeper_Final.pdf

2. Archbishops' Council, *Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church* (2015), p. 9. Available at www.churchofengland.org/media/2148423/growth%20misc%201092%20-%20rural%20multi%20parish%20benefices.pdf

3. Multi-church groups is a generic term used to cover multi-parish benefice, team ministry, united parish, united benefice, etc.

4. www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/07/pepinster-poverty-rural-poor-herefordshire-priests-church-of-england-society

5. Archbishops' Council, *Released for Mission*.

6. Tweedie, *Going Deeper*.

7. Archbishops' Council, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (2014), available at www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report

Growth needs to be understood in at least three ways:

- in depth of discipleship and quality of relationship with God and with each other;
- in increasing numbers, we are called to make new disciples;
- in service of others, our neighbours, the local community and beyond.

As so much of rural church growth is organic rather than programme-driven or directive, all three of these ways need to be taking place for new disciples to be formed. In rural communities there is no hiding place for the Christian, everybody knows who goes to church: 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7.20). Unless the rural church has the credibility reflected from loving service and quality of relationships then making new disciples is almost impossible. Many rural churches do have these qualities, others need to learn them.

Multi-church groups and growth

Growth is possible in rural multi-church groups when the right conditions are in place. That is what emerged clearly from the research that led to the publication of *Released for Mission*.⁵ The research shows that growth in rural churches is associated with six particular characteristics:

1. An intentional focus on mission and evangelism, beyond a focus on Sunday worship.
2. A culture of personal and corporate discipleship within congregations.
3. A committed group of laypeople leading a range of activities and events, with easily accessible training and support available.
4. A redirection of time and energy, particularly but not exclusively for clergy, from administration and building maintenance to outreach, service and evangelism.
5. An approach to ordained ministry in which discerning, nurturing and equipping the ministry of laypeople within the body of Christ is one of the highest-priority areas of work for the clergy, backed up by appropriate training and support.
6. Cooperation and collaboration within and between different multi-church groups, and ecumenically wherever possible.

The research indicates that developing these six characteristics must be a priority for rural multi-church groups that seek to grow and for the diocesan strategies that support them. As such, rural church growth is not that difficult to do but often takes place as the result of slow patient pastoral work, engagement with schools and reaching out to the wider community by clergy and congregation alike. Signs of new life can come from an intentional consolidation of existing activity in service and discipleship leading to growing numbers.

Growth is also not limited by some of the factors we imagine are barriers. The Church Growth Research Programme tested five factors that could influence church growth or decline using data from a ten year period between 2001 and 2011.⁶ The findings were surprising in some respects.

Geographical location plays a part as growth is

the rural church makes up around 66% of Church of England parishes and churches

highest in an urban conurbation, but rural villages and hamlets also show very similar proportions of growth. Parishes in cities, larger town centres and rural towns show significantly greater decline than parishes in other areas. The size and structure of a multi-church group does not have a significant impact on growth or decline.

Churches also tended to grow when the population of the parish increased. They tended to decline in size when the population declined, though this effect was much more important for large cities and towns but was less pronounced in rural areas. The size of the existing congregation influences growth, but this differs depending on the geographical location of the parish. In urban areas it is larger congregations (i.e. an existing congregation of 90 or more people) that are more likely to grow. In rural areas it is smaller congregations that see more growth (i.e. congregations of 30 or less).

Clergy deployment does have an effect on growth in rural churches: the number of clergy, the time available to them and how they are deployed all influence growth, with more clergy and more time available by clergy being associated with growth. The change in the number of clergy also impacts growth, with reducing numbers (through vacancy or redeployment) being associated with decline, although the effect of this is much less pronounced in rural multi-church groups than in urban areas.

How should we make use of this information?

Firstly, correlation is not causation, so that whilst this quantitative analysis provides useful guidance and pointers for factors that may influence church growth, other qualitative factors are important. These include: having a clear mission and purpose; being willing to change and adapt, as well as reflect on practice; involving laypeople in mission and ministry; having a focus on working with children and young people; being intentional in outreach; nurturing new and existing disciples.⁷

Secondly, growth and decline in rural multi-church groups is extremely complicated and nuanced. Whatever the geography and size, growth and decline are influenced by many factors which

interact with each other, only five have been explored here. However, they also indicate that in strategic terms it is important to focus on improving clergy retention and preventing burnout by providing good quality, relevant training and support for clergy in multi-church groups. Additionally, this indicates that growth requires a patient long-term input, particularly by clergy. It also suggests that the particular form of recognised leadership and oversight offered by clergy is important for making new disciples.

growth in rural churches is more likely to come through creating new ways for people to discover the gospel

Evangelism often happens differently in rural communities, partly because of the knowing and being known, for good and for ill, within the community, so it becomes more difficult to stand out or make a change. As a result, there are no definite boundaries between who is 'in' and who is 'out' of a congregation, with some permanently on the periphery. A model that assumes a perpetual cycle of connection, nurture, response to a challenge and growth, may be unhelpful in the very smallest communities.

Although a challenge to make a commitment does need to be made, it is often long-term patient engagement with people, families, schools and other community groups that leads to commitment as new disciples. For example, a multi-church group of six very different parishes in a commuter rural area started to see increasing numbers coming forward for baptism in the two larger villages after the incumbent and a core group of laypeople adopted a pastoral approach to ministry. High quality funeral ministry and bereavement care was a priority as was regular engagement by several people with the non-church primary schools through a wide range of activities. There was also regular prayer for each of the communities. This increase in children coming forward for baptism has led to some adult baptisms and a group of women and men asking for confirmation after an Alpha course. A post-Alpha group now meets regularly and for some in that group that is church. The challenge to make a commitment was made but as part of an evolving journey that is neither linear or cyclical, but very much about engagement and response to that is not formulaic.

Growth in rural churches is unlikely to come through increasing the size of Sunday morning congregations, although it might. It is more likely to come through creating new ways for people to discover the gospel, perhaps for the first time. George Lings's concept of 'reproducing churches' is helpful here. Growing churches says Lings, is not about growing 'bigger, brighter boxes', but about

allowing a diverse 'reproduction' of different types of churches. In other words, 'the church must dare to have church children, who are related to us but not the same as their parent body.'⁸ Another way of putting this would be to say that in order to grow, rural churches need to become more internally diverse, with a variety of ways to be church, as shown by the diversity of fresh expressions of church and Messy Church.⁹

A youth bus project in a rural area provides a good example of this concept working in practice. Up to 30 young people aged between 11 and 18 attend the youth bus each week, making use of the facilities to play computer games, listen to music or just hang out together. The last half hour of the time is spent in the church (the bus parks in its car park). There is a rolling presentation of images and video clips with a different theme each week, which creates a space to talk and explore faith. This helps the children to form their own identity in Christ and the young people feel they can play with the ideas and with the church building itself, which they have come to think of as their own. This approach has also helped to develop young leaders and who can be part of leading this in the future.

Ministry of whole people of God

Laypeople are already deeply involved in almost all aspects of rural church life including pastoral care, working with children and young people, worship, mission, administration and keeping the building up and open, in addition to many other roles they may have, plus those in the wider community. In many congregations (rural and urban) it may be only a few people who carry out most of the roles. However, the rural congregations need to be helped to see themselves as part of the body of Christ, each with a role to play in God's mission. That role starts with prayer. A rural church wanting to see growth in any or all of its forms needs prayer at its heart. Everyone in a congregation can be equipped to pray regularly, so that the whole people of God are actively involved.

The whole people of God have something to contribute to the *missio dei*. Part of this understanding comes through valuing the small and seemingly insignificant contributions as much as those that are more obvious. Having the confidence and commitment to help serve refreshments at Messy Church may be as big a step as leading worship or sharing faith with a friend. Growth is much more difficult without this commitment that all have a part to play.

Conclusion

It is time to tell a new story of the rural church. Rural churches can and do grow in depth of relationship with God, numbers and service. It is hard work particularly for ordained and lay leaders, but it is rewarding as new ways are discovered to reach out to those in rural areas who are yet to hear the gospel.

NOTES

8. G Lings, 'A Case for Multiplying the Type and Number of Churches', *Rural Theology* 14.2 (2016), pp. 112–33, p. 131. See <http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14704994.2016.1234858>

9. Church Army's research has shown that Messy churches are often found in rural areas. Church Army's research unit report *The Day of Small Things* showed 49% of Anglican Messy churches occurred across a variety of rural settings. G Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (Sheffield: Church Army, 2016), section 7.3, p. 133. Available at https://churcharmy.org/Groups/286719/Church_Army/web/What_we_do/Research_Unit/Current_research/The_Day_of_aspx