



DIOCESE OF
Bath & Wells

Living the story. Telling the story.

Flourishing Rural Church

Working group report

October 2018

A theological starting point for a fruitful rural church

Introductory reflections

Preamble

We want to start with theology. It seems easy enough to say that, but we feel it in our bones. As a group, we understand that we, the Church, inhabit a shared story. We give expression to it in our own particular ways, as individual churches belonging to the body of Christ. We give expression to it in our own lives, as members of those churches bearing faithful witness to the risen Lord. There is one story, but it has many tellings.

So we begin by reasserting our confidence in that story, and our commitment to it. We understand that 'strategy' occasionally gets a bad rap in churchy circles. It's a word that is easily misrepresented, as being about top-down unilateral decision-making by the cash-obsessed diocese, or a thoughtless reaching for management speak that bears little relation to the realities of church life, let alone our liturgies and scriptures.

But we don't see ourselves as pursuing any such thing. If a strategy emerges from our deliberations, it's no more and no less than the outline of a way of being with rural churches, in all their glorious mess and muddle. It's a way of holding the tension of their particular identity and context alongside our shared discernment of this one story, the big story, that we want to share, and celebrate, and live together.

A different conversation

So we've uncovered some theological resources that may help to guide our thinking. We don't think they're exclusive sources of insight. Indeed, we recognise that we have much to learn from other disciplines. It is helpful, for example, to analyse figures relating to church attendance in rural communities, or the engagement of rural churchgoers with the lives of their towns, villages and hamlets. It's also crucial to understand the financial and administrative pressures facing rural churches. And it's vital that we grasp the stresses and strains upon those in ministry, lay and ordained.

In every case, understanding this stuff, the empirical stuff, matters because it's what we need to make easier, or more bearable, if the rural church is to flourish. We can't ignore it, therefore. But we can frame our conversation about it differently. We can talk about it in a different register.

On the importance of particular places

Our deliberations don't take place in a bubble, whether that is the geographical bubble of Wells, or the ideological bubble of abstract theology. This is our point: if we're to take theology seriously, we have to take the particular contexts in which people seek to be the church seriously, too.

That's because Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, the God-man, speaks to us in and through particular circumstances. It matters that he becomes a particular man, at a particular time, in a

particular place. It matters because it shows us that God works through particularity rather than generality. In other words, Christ's judgment on us is discerned in and through our location in a given place, to which the Church, *churches*, bear witness. And just as Jesus Christ's humanity is impossible to disentangle from his divinity, so our particular earthly location always gestures beyond itself, to our ultimate hope in God.

In other words, our stories matter, each and every one of them, because they reach towards the big story, of a God who creates us, and to whom we are reconciled through the cross, and who promises us redemption in his kingdom.

The big story is known through our little stories. We need to remember that when we seek to engage with rural churches. We need to be exquisitely sensitive to the precise circumstances they are facing, to the particular ways in which they are trying to live the story of Jesus, the God-man who comes to save. That's not only a smart move politically. It's what we're required to do, by theology, which is our starting point.

Being, not doing

If our theological commitment requires that we are attentive to the particular stories being lived by rural churches throughout the diocese, it is not yet clear how it drives action. Despite our reticence about the term, we recognise that we need to identify something akin to a 'strategy' that can help such churches to thrive, or at least enable them to recover the hope of fruitfulness that is God's good promise to us. In other words, it's not enough simply to say, 'Be attentive to particularity'. That's a nice thing to do, but it might not make a difference.

Or will it? It is our suspicion that paying close and careful attention to particular churches, giving them a chance to tell their story and set it in the wider context of the diocese's shared life and of the narrative located in the gospel, will be empowering and hope-giving. This is more than just a listening exercise. It's about the diocese saying, 'We want to witness your story, sanctify it, share it, and encourage you to continue living it anew every day.'

Odd as it sounds, such an approach – a *way of being* with rural churches, if you like – may be sufficiently countercultural to have an impact. It certainly has a precedent. It's pretty much what Christ did when he sat with people, listened closely to them, and showed them how their stories gestured to the bigger story that he himself embodied. Think of the woman at the well in John 4, or the rich young man, or Nicodemus. Think of the Apostle Peter himself, or Zacchaeus, or any of that cast of motley characters who come to discern through time in Christ's company that they matter, their stories matter, because in spite of everything, they have a place in *his story*, and are made whole.

So let's begin simply, and unambitiously, by making the boldest statement we can to the rural churches in our midst: you, each and every one of you, has a story to tell. And we want to hear it, to get caught up in it, and to help you retell it in ways that inspire hope, faith and a deep and shared yearning for the kingdom.

We long for you to be rejuvenated, but we don't want to reinvent you. Rather, we want to come alongside you and love you to perfection, warts and all.

Being Christlike

Yes, let's be Christ to each other. Surely that's what it means to be the Church, and a church, and a diocese, come to that. To be Christ in this world, carrying the seed of the kingdom until he comes again in glory to restore and renew us.

That's what it means to say we begin with theology. Because it's our belief that, if we have faith, all the other stuff – the administrative reordering, the challenges of multi-church benefices, the finance, the fabric, the strained relationships – *all* that stuff will fall in line.

Yes, we'll need to figure it out together. We can't just sweep it beneath the carpet. But if we begin in the right place, with our shared yearning to be like Christ, to live his story in our own stories and help others do the same, then the difficult conversations will seem easier, the intractable problems just about soluble, the impossible relationships just about manageable.

Yes, let's begin with theology, *our story*. And renew our confidence that the rest will follow.

The Revd Dr Tim Gibson
August 2018

Report

PART 1 – PRINCIPLES

1.1 Why Flourishing?

It will be seen from the preceding theological introduction that we are approaching the questions around the rural church from a position of optimism. This reflects our own preference but is also a deliberate choice. We noted, early in our discussions, that much of the narrative around the rural is anything but optimistic. While some of the pessimism stems from harsh reality, it does not reflect the experience of group members who are living and working in rural church communities in the Diocese. Equally importantly, it does not reflect God's will for the rural church. We are optimistic because our faith is in the God who raised Christ from the dead, and in Christ himself who builds his church. Such a faith is always accompanied by hope for the future of the church, even though the exact shape of that future may not yet be visible.

For these reasons, we felt uncomfortable with our original working title of "Sustainable Rural Church". "Sustainable" felt unambitious, and too easily interpreted as "just about hanging on". Such a vision does not do justice to the rural church and is unlikely to inspire. Therefore, we have adopted the word **flourishing** as a better representation for the desired future of the rural church in Bath and Wells.

1.2 A common endeavour

We began by surveying the work of other dioceses in addressing rural church issues. One of the surprises here is that few dioceses seem to have a rural church strategy as such. At this stage, then, though we can learn a great deal from other dioceses, there is no blueprint for "how to do" rural church. Indeed, anecdote suggests that other dioceses are eagerly awaiting the results of our discussions to discover the blueprint. One of the concerns here is that there does seem to be an underlying assumption that the rural church is a problem to be fixed by the diocese. An approach based on this assumption is unlikely to be successful, for a number of reasons:

- i) Rural churches in general, are smaller and more dependent on relationships and networking than on leadership & management driven modes of operation. Strategies which do not recognise this are unlikely to have any impact.
- ii) Strategies devised by a central leadership and secretariat, without consultation, on behalf of churches are never popular. Rural churches are often already remote from the centre of the Diocese, both literally and metaphorically, and perceive, whether fairly or not, a sense of "them and us" in diocesan matters. Any attempt to impose a top-down strategy without consent can only exacerbate this.

- iii) In a diocese like Bath and Wells the rural church is, by some measures at least, the larger part of the Diocese. In this context it would be ridiculous to create any sense that rural churches are one topical issue among many that we face. Rural mission and ministry is, in effect, our core business.

Therefore we see the work of discerning what the flourishing rural church looks like as a common endeavour, in which the whole diocese works together. In this endeavour rural churches will not be forced to accept top-down solutions, nor will they be left alone to solve problems without support. Responsibility will be shared between parishes, deaneries, and diocese.

1.3 Hearing the voice of the church

With all this in mind, one of our principal aims is that **the voice of the rural church** is heard. If rural churches do sometimes feel disenfranchised, and ignored by diocesan policy, then part of the way to address this is to ensure that they can be heard at every possible level in the Diocese. Conversations about rural mission and ministry need to include those who are directly involved.

Importantly, hearing the voice of the rural church should not be thought of simply as a question of rural talking to non-rural. This would be in danger of going further into a “them and us” scenario. What is also important is that the rural church hears its own voice, and that rural churches listen to each other. This is a conversation in which churches need to be encouraged to find confidence, and to learn together as they work out what it means to flourish.

1.4 Pursuing best practice nationally

We have been conscious that in the pursuit of a flourishing rural church, we are not working alone or starting from scratch. We want to build on the knowledge and experience of rural practitioners throughout the Church of England. In addition to the work in other dioceses (referred to above), we have found helpful the national reports, *Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church* (2015) and *Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups* (2017). We have been grateful for the support and advice of Dr Jill Hopkinson (National Rural Officer). Rather than devising novel lists of recommendations of our own, we believe that our strategy for the flourishing rural church should **build on and develop** the recommendations of these reports.

1.5 Sharing good news stories

Good practice is found within our Diocese, as well as outside. We know that throughout the Diocese, there are places where the rural church is already flourishing, witnessing to God’s transforming love for their communities. Many of our churches are showing imagination and vigour in their ministry and mission. However, many of these are little known outside their own communities, perhaps because of a reluctance to be seen as showing off, or perhaps simply through lack of opportunity. We strongly believe that a core part of our task

is to **share these good news stories** more widely within the Diocese. This will help to celebrate the strengths of rural churches, and also encourage the spread of good ideas around the Diocese.

1.6 Telling the Story

Taking all this together, we recommend that one of the principal aims of “Flourishing Rural Church” is **telling the story of the rural church**. This articulates the desire to give the rural church a voice and a stake in the conversation, and has the added attraction of resonance with our diocesan vision. In practice, “telling the story” could take a number of forms, including special events, use of media, training days and specialist networks. The aims of this would be:

- i) To celebrate the things that are flourishing in the rural church
- ii) To share good ideas in order to stimulate the imagination and ambition of rural churches for what they can do in and for their communities
- iii) To enable the Diocese to learn together what a flourishing rural church looks like.

PART 2 – WORK IN PROGRESS

2.1 Asking difficult questions

We are aware that there are a number of challenges facing rural churches, some of which are serious, and in some cases threatening to the existence of the church in certain places. This, perhaps, is what lay behind the choice of the original title of *Sustainable Rural Church*. None of what has been said so far is to deny the reality or the seriousness of such challenges. There are difficult questions to be asked, of which the following are good examples:

- Is it possible to maintain all the church buildings we currently have in the rural parts of the Diocese?
- What is a realistic level of stipendiary ministry in the countryside in the future?
- Is there a critical size of community which is too small to nurture a flourishing church?

We hope it is evident why we did not wish to begin by considering such questions. They are too serious to ignore, but their very seriousness is the reason for focussing on “flourishing”, rather than “sustainable”. Research has consistently demonstrated¹ the paradox that churches which grow (in the broadest sense) are those that are able to focus their attention away from such questions and on to the development of mission, worship, and discipleship. In contrast, churches which become preoccupied with apparently existential threats are in most danger of seeing these threats realised.

¹ eg. *The Healthy Churches Handbook*, Robert Warren, CHP 2004; *From Anecdote to Evidence*, Church Commissioners, 2014.

It is our recommendation that these difficult questions are best tackled as a second phase of this work, within the context of “telling the story” as outlined in 1.6. above. We believe that this will enable churches to address the questions from a position of hope, and with resources at hand to inspire and encourage them.

2.2 Getting practical

Part of the second phase of this work is to get to grips with some of the practical challenges facing rural parishes. Within the Diocese, there are some practical issues that are consistently reported by churches as causing them problems:

- 2.2.1 **Buildings.** Fundraising, demands of building and grounds management falling on a few individuals, and difficulties with the faculty system and other regulations surrounding historic churches.
- 2.2.2 **Administration.** The workload of regulations (ecclesiastical and external) and church management, again falling on a small number of individuals in a typical parish. Church administrators, whether paid or voluntary, can be difficult to find where there are few suitable people or little resource to offer payment.
- 2.2.3 **Finance.** Congregations often lack the capacity to raise enough funds to pay bills and to contribute to the Common Fund. Even relatively small Share allocations can be difficult to find when congregations are very small in number.

Whilst these are perhaps not the most fundamental challenges facing rural churches, there is an argument to say that these things are distracting churches from the call to live and tell the story. We also recognise that there are many possible ways in which life could be made easier for churches in these areas, and in our discussions we have already begun to itemise some ideas. Some of these could be implemented by the parishes themselves, and some are for the deanery or Diocese. We recommend that a key next step is to work specifically on these practical areas, to identify and encourage the implementation of solutions which make them less burdensome for small rural parishes.

2.3 Ministry and Discipleship

In our discussions we are aware that there are many shining examples of collaborative ministry and lay leadership in our diocese. At the same time, though, we are aware of many benefices where the inherited model of ministry is simply not working. There is more work to be done in both areas:

- 2.3.1 **Licensed Ministry.** In many places licensed ministers seem to be working with a limited view of what rural ministry entails. This in turn limits how much the church can flourish. In particular, we see a need for more training and sharing of good practice among stipendiary clergy who are not always prepared for the challenges of working across multiple parishes, or for the equipping and releasing of the laity.
- 2.3.2 **Lay leadership.** Many rural parishes have not yet embraced the culture change by which lay people are encouraged to take responsibility for leadership in their own

church. We see this as absolutely crucial to the future of the rural church, especially (but not only) in less densely populated areas where the clergy are spread over multiple, smaller, parishes or churches.

2.4 Deanery Mission Planning

There is a large overlap between the aims of Flourishing Rural Church and Deanery Mission Planning. The principles of the DMP process, to encourage mission across the deanery, and for churches to collaborate in areas where they are stronger together, are exactly the principles which will encourage the flourishing of rural churches. An emphasis on the health of the rural church will also make deaneries healthier. Therefore, the framework of Flourishing Rural Church should allow deaneries to participate fully, by contributing to the development of, and by learning from the stories of rural churches.

2.5 Aligning for Mission

The implementation of our second strategic priority, to realign our resources towards mission, is an important feature in a future where the rural church is to flourish. Notably, the working group for “Aligning for Mission” has often found itself discussing the same things referred to in this report. Clearly in the next phase of work, it will be important to ensure that Flourishing Rural Church is aligned with the wider diocesan strategy and aims.

PART 3 – RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on this report, we recommend the following next steps in order to develop this as a strand within the diocesan strategy:

Recommendation 1

Establish a Flourishing Rural Church steering group under the chairmanship of Rob Walrond, Diocesan Rural Life Adviser. The FRC Group will have responsibility within the Diocesan strategy for developing the recommendations of this report and ensuring that:

- i) Rural issues are properly considered and represented within Diocesan policy (rural-proofing)
- ii) Rural churches are encouraged to implement the Diocese’s strategic priorities in ways that are appropriate to their context.

The FRC group should also take responsibility for seeing that the other recommendations of this report are implemented.

Recommendation 2

Ensure the FRC Group has the power to make further recommendations to Bishops’ Staff and Bishops’ Council regarding practical issues affecting rural churches. This will require the Group to have terms of reference approved by Bishops’ Council. The FRC Group should consider what recommendations it wishes to make, especially in respect to administration, finance, and buildings.

Recommendation 3

Work with the Diocesan Comms team to develop “Flourishing Rural Church” as a recognisable brand within the Diocesan strategy and vision. Using this as a banner for all our rural-related initiatives will send a positive message and should increase confidence and encourage creative thinking about the future of rural churches. As part of this, the group should seek out good news stories from rural churches and ensure these are regularly shared through diocesan channels and other media.

Recommendation 4

Ask the Diocesan Training Team to continue developing rural-specific training within the Diocese, including training for clergy in the oversight of multiple rural parishes and enabling lay leaders, and also training to support lay people taking on leadership roles in rural churches. In addition, work with ministry training providers (TEI’s) in the region to encourage the development of IME pathways specifically tailored to rural ministry.

Recommendation 5

Working with the Ministry for Mission team, develop the annual Rural Forum as the principal event and storytelling showcase of Flourishing Rural Church, with the possibility of increasing the frequency to twice a year, and/or smaller satellite events for local and specialist areas. In addition, develop networks for the sharing of good practice, eg. administrators, rural fresh expressions, small market towns.

Recommendation 6

Task SPIG to develop a strategic framework for “aligning for mission” in the rural context. This may involve asking some hard questions about the shape of ministry and the distribution of resources in the rural church – but the aim will be the same as across the whole Diocese: to invest in the flourishing of the church, to remove the burdens from churches that cannot carry them, and to bless that which is growing.

As a group, we offer these recommendations in confidence and hope, that God’s church in this Diocese is already flourishing under his care and will continue to do so in the future.

15th October 2018

Members of the working group

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