



A fresh approach to rural ministry

TN51 Training Notes series: Structures

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This is a joint-venture between John Truscott and Jim Mynors. Jim served in rural ordained ministry alongside diocesan and regional training roles for over 25 years. Before that he serviced groups of Christian students in a style not dissimilar from what is proposed here.

These notes are written out of a conviction that, with stipendiary clergy numbers declining, traditional models for staffing rural churches are no longer workable and cannot be tinkered with any further.

Clergy can be put under intolerable pressure as more parishes are added to their portfolio. Logical solutions with joint-services moving from village to village each week simply do not work and fail to address issues of pastoral care and outreach. Something completely new is urgently required.

So here is a possible rural strategy that seeks a new and coherent approach for groups of villages. The most likely application will be multi-parish benefices in the Church of England, although the ideas would be even more appropriate in an ecumenical setting. The notes are set out as group discussion starters.

The thinking here takes the line that rural ministry is perhaps closer to the churches that the apostle Paul established than anything else we have today: scattered groups of Christians living in areas where community life has not yet entirely disappeared but where Christian leadership is scarce.

The ten points launch straightaway into a new mindset. We need to 'unlearn' the concept of the resident village Vicar providing a local 'service' in more ways than one.

1 **Episcopal ministry**

The key should be to see the Minister with a completely new function, and in doing this to backtrack on recent attempts to share him or her out more thinly. So think 'apostle' (Ephesians 4 – in terms of a roving ministry) or, perhaps more accurately, 'bishop/overseer' (but in the sense of 1 Timothy 1:3- and Titus 1:5) instead of a congregationally-based 'pastor/teacher'.

The Minister then has oversight of a group of worshipping cells, rather than being restricted to any one of them. So the apostle or overseer does not need to be at everything that each church arranges (both business meetings and services), but appoints and supports local leaders, and pioneers new congregations.

How can clergy already accustomed to traditional models of ministry be helped to make this key break, when all their training and experience has been based on a very different way of thinking?

2 **Local presence**

Current thinking about outreach is based on the idea of personal networks since geographical clustering no longer applies so much in urban and suburban areas. The concept of homogenous units is back in vogue again, grouping people by culture, age or gender. Most churches display clear tribal affinities, whether by tradition, liturgy or the national events they promote.

But in the countryside it would be wise to reverse all these movements! We should celebrate geographical identity (as in Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, etc.) rather than aim for a gathered membership selected by styles. We then have to work at harmonious living in a mixed congregation, just as the Early Church had to be taught for Jew and Gentile to live and work together in Christ (Romans 1:16. Galatians 3:28).

In a pick 'n' mix age, how can we help people work at belonging to a church that encompasses a wide range of views, rather than voting with their cars and travelling to specialist churches instead?

3 **Shared specialisms**

But the village unit is too small both for specialist staffing and as a means of providing outreach and pastoral needs for certain groups of people. So alongside the local gathering of a diverse group of people as the church in the local community there needs to be a group-wide structure too. In Church of England parishes, the deanery might be the appropriate unit for this, but it could be an informal local grouping.

Centralised leadership and expertise might include: ordained/licensed ministry, music, schools work, youth ministry (perhaps paid staff), administration including the care of old buildings, financial oversight and book-keeping, Alpha-type courses. Evangelistic and pastoral units that might work well across a group would include children's work, young parents, new Christians, men's groups. Leadership might therefore follow a matrix pattern: oversight of a number of localised village units alongside a specialism for the whole group (see 1 Corinthians 3:6).

How can longer-standing church members be helped to imbibe this new way of thinking when the traditional priestly model is so deeply ingrained?

4 Understanding 'church'

There are two options for where the concept of 'church' fits best: a group of several churches or one church of several congregations. Is the village congregation the church (so ordained staff would be more strongly episcopal than pastoral), or is the grouping of villages seen as the one church with different congregations that happen to meet in different places (in which case the ordained member of staff would be more clearly a church leader)?

But why not celebrate variety again and follow the pattern that makes most sense in the group concerned? After all, the churches in Acts and the Epistles do not seem to fit one shape. Although they followed more the first of these options, that was because there were large distances between them.

Larger and more remote villages (such as those cut off by a main road) tend to prefer independence. Small villages with no obvious barriers between them are more likely to follow a multi-congregational way of thinking. Choose the more appropriate option.

In either case, should finance and hence giving be seen as a local issue or a group matter? Why?

5 Authorisation and training

The episcopal model in 1 means that there must be a leader or, better, a small leadership team, for each village. This could simply be the PCC (or equivalent), if small in number. This in turn calls for a new approach to authorisation that is appropriate for the setting and the people concerned, somewhat more radical than the present Church of England move towards locally licensed ministry. Such leaders would, between them, be responsible for leading services, teaching, visiting, music and so on. The point is that each of these would be local as the norm, with the external ordained enabler having more a role of training than of taking these ministries over.

So training becomes a key activity for the apostle/overseer – and it is of course training on the job. This then becomes the key strategy for handing on the faith from one generation to the next, much as Paul was seeking to achieve (1 Corinthians 15:3, 2 Timothy 2:2). This is more difficult now than then because of people's mobility, so this demands transferable and national criteria for accreditation. This is the long-term growth strategy required to keep rural churches alive, as proved in New Testament times by Paul in, for example, Ephesus and Philippi.

What might this mean for the leadership of Communion services?

6 Apostolic ministry

It is now possible to return to point 1 and give the ordained Minister some new roles! Instead of the traditional pattern of taking several church services every Sunday, why not release Ministers to inaugurate new ministries of outreach? Rural areas desperately need fresh approaches to schools work, village events and the group-wide ministries mentioned in point 3. So energies applied to parenting courses or debt counselling or support for beleaguered farmers might prove to become services in the community that meet real needs. With a model such as described above, there is now scope to follow up such possibilities.

What new ministries would be appropriate for meeting needs or introducing the faith in your rural community if there were the resources to initiate them?

7 **Central hub**

With shared specialisms (point 3) it may sometimes make sense to set up a central office which acts both as administrative centre for communication and equipment, and a location out of which staff (ordained and lay) can work, so they can form a team that works tightly together. This may work best at either benefice or deanery level. Rural ministry can be lonely and team-working needs to become a key concept.

Such a point has dangers (such as the concept of things being decided somewhere else other than the immediate location), so it needs to be balanced with the corresponding advantages of decentralisation. This is another example where different groups of villages may come up with different solutions.

Might a central base detract in a significant way from the ownership of each village unit and clash with point 6 above as a result?

8 **Ancient buildings**

Some buildings are in the wrong location for the community they serve (eg. away from the heart of the community, placed the wrong side of a new by-pass or without easy access). Other buildings need huge amounts of money spent on them just to keep them safe, warm and watertight. Still others are too big and expensive to maintain. Where possible responsibility for upkeep should become a specialist activity (not part of the Minister's brief or even that of local leadership). Church communities should be encouraged to meet in other locations where this makes them more attractive to newcomers (homes, community halls, etc.).

When should an ordained Minister become involved in rural building issues, and when would it be right for him or her to focus on other priorities instead?

9 **Community focus**

The rural church is often the only remaining village institution once the Post Office and pub have gone. This means that these churches can take the initiative in creating a people-shaped heart to the local community by means of hosting the local website, producing the community newsletter, and offering their building (if appropriate) for all kinds of community use. In such ways the Church can again become salt and light for the local community and see its values countering the rampant secularism all around. Time invested in local schools and village charities can be key here (see point 6). These are not diversions from gospel ministry in rural areas, but central aspects.

How possible is this in a commuter village where the majority have their focus elsewhere for jobs, schools and shops?

10 **Central celebrations**

Many Christians (usually those who have moved from suburban to rural locations) want a quality and size of church activity that no one local village church can offer. A pattern to establish then is to promote local membership for, perhaps, Sunday worship with the provision of a more celebratory event at another time of week or, more likely, month (with quality teaching, multi-media and music). This might be organised by the group in one location or encouraged through a nearby larger church, though never as a means for that church insisting on an export of its own value system. The point is to stop village Christians commuting outside the locality on a weekly basis.

How might patronal festivals and other special Sundays be re-energised in this way?

A final thought: having trained the Twelve and others to carry on with his work, Jesus' apparent disappearance (but cf. Acts 1:1) led not to a collapse but to the Early Church's rapid growth. A real test of rural ministry is what happens on the departure of the Minister. In the light of the Ascension a good goal is to 'work oneself out of a job' whatever reorganisation follows and to leave behind churches that are about to grow (whether or not they are still only a mere dozen strong).

So there is the outline of a possible model for future rural ministry. It assumes spiritual life at the core so that is why prayer and holy living have not been mentioned in this organisational analysis as such.

Overall, what are its benefits and what are its snags and can they be overcome? What about your own ideas? Please contribute to the debate and give us your suggestions.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN51. For a wide range of materials on rural ministry, see <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk> and <https://ruraltheologyassociation.com>.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN51 under Structures (with a link to Planning).

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