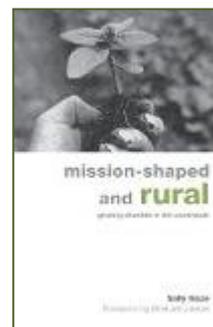


Sally Gaze : Mission-shaped and rural – growing churches in the countryside

CHP 2006

Notes by Alison Morgan December 2006



Sally was on the MShCh group, and is rector of Tas Valley benefice in Norfolk, 6 parishes.

It will not do in our mission to assume that evangelism and the routine of worship in the countryside can or should be a straight transfer from urban, let alone suburban, patterns' some of the malaise and frustration that are felt in rural churches have to do with this, as well as with expectations that are brought in from elsewhere.

Rowan Williams

Prologue

Young mums finishing a Christian basics course – traditional village services are not accessible. So they set up daytime cells, a monthly food and song service with children acting the reading and the ministry of the Word cast as testimony and story rather than exposition/analysis, with crafts and prayers based on them, grace and tea.

Henry Venn, C19th: new churches need to be self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating. So they set up a cell bank account, which makes contributions to the parish share, providing an identity until network churches can be recognised within the CoFE.

1. Mission

Mission-shaped church vs church-shaped mission...

Parable of a would-be farmer, who was required to do paperwork, buildings, meetings – and never got round to growing anything. Can feel like that in rural ministry. 'It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world' – Tim Dearbon. Mission has a trinitarian shape – it comes from God the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. Jesus points to his Father as the initiator of his mission. That means for all Christians that mission starts with listening prayer; if not, it isn't mission! Rural ministry often invites the minister to concentrate on things which will draw people together – but listening prayer and a mission focus must be non-negotiable, for these are of the essence of what it is to be church.

Example: 2 old ladies praying on the Isle of Lewis in 1949...

Rural churches often shy away from talking about the HS – esp when they associate him with handwaving, bizarre manifestations and guitar-led choruses. But they also often experience him bringing unity. The story of Pentecost models the mission of the Church, translating the message into every cultural language.

The pattern of Jesus' mission:

- Incarnation – he engages fully in the prevailing culture and yet challenges it to its core with the values of God's kingdom. Eg he worships in the synagogue on the sabbath – but also heals on that day. 1 Cor 9.20-23, the incarnational principle (to the Jews etc). Rural churches are incarnational when they celebrate harvest. *But for many people the idea of going to a medieval building to sing to an organ, read some prayers and listen to a talk based on the text of an ancient book does not appear as if it would help them discover the meaning of the universe, never mind have any bearing on everyday struggles with work, debts, addictions or relationships, 10.*
- Dying to live. The image of seedplanting is particularly relevant to the dynamic of starting a new church: the seed stands for the missionary team, setting aside their own preferences and customs in order to immerse themselves in new cultural soil. Eg Martin Down in Ashill, the founding of the Fountain of Life network church, now seeking status as a missionary congregation under the new pastoral measure of the CoFE.

Mission is not an add-on activity, but rather the reason the church exists.

2. Listening to rural culture

Rural is defined by govt as settlement form, remoteness, number/type of commercial addresses. Only 2% now work in agriculture (on 75% of land); those who do tend to live isolated lives. The countryside is dominated by tourism – walking is the most popular leisure activity in Britain; day trips account for £9 billion pa, farming for £7. Tourists look for retreat, revival, recreation, risk – theological and spiritual values. 70% of country dwellers were not born there. There is more social contact in rural areas, but it's network based.

Mission – impce of ‘double listening’ – to the missionary context but also to ourselves. We need to make sure the mission-questions drive the church answers, not v.v. Listening is followed by engagement.

3. Engaging with rural culture

Enculturation. Task of missionary is to learn how the gospel is revealed in the target culture. 3 stages:

- Translation – double listening
- Assimilation – sharing values between church and cultural setting
- Transformation – dying to live, church understanding what it means to live by gospel values in this setting

Bob Jackson: ‘*churches do not need sophisticated resources to grow. They need high quality relationships*’.

Rural congregations are declining, because the kinds of people who like rural church as it now is are also declining.

Christian Research predicts that by 2040 all rural churches will be gone, and Christians will be 2% of population. Bob says our greatest mistake was to treat all churches as if they were oak trees – able to grow to any size and live forever.

Gardens have lots of different plants...

There is a need for agricultural-mission shaped churches, shaped by their mission in farming community.

- Farming networks.
- Farming based cell church.
- A Rocha.
- Responding to tourism.
- Rezurgence (www.rezurgence.com).
- Contemplative Fire (www.contemplativefire.org).
- The Fountain of Life – a missionary network congregation in Norfolk.

Network churches- is it embracing a cultural reality, which ought rather to be resisted? It leaves the old, housebound, unemployed, carless out. Answer is that we need both network and parish churches.

4. Rural fresh expressions

Chapter explores the Mission Shaped Church categories of the Report.

- Alternative worship communities, eg The Gathering in a Bucks barn, with music from Orthodox to Afro-celtic
- Base ecclesial communities
- Café church, eg Milverton, offering breakfasts
- Cell church
- Churches arising out of community initiatives, eg a post office church, a farmers’ market church
- Multiple congregations, eg Upper Hayford
- Network focussed churches
- School-based churches
- Seeker services
- Traditional church plants
- Youth congregations
- Traditional forms of church inspiring new interest, eg Shotesham, tenebrae services with candles; new monasticism

5. But are Fresh Expressions church?

Marks of a church – one, holy, catholic, apostolic. A new church can begin with any one of these 4 marks of the Christian journey; it doesn’t have to start with worship! All expressions of church are partial.

Eg cafeplus+ in Oxford began with relationships

The three self principles:

- Self financing – a key element in developing a fresh expression
- Self governing – all fresh expressions cited in this book have relied on diocesan interest and support, and permission for self-governance.
- Self propagating – able to plant new churches

6. Pruning the vine – restructuring rural church for mission

It hurts – but space has to be made by the old for the new. Eg Cafeplus+ depended on the freeing up of one Sunday a month from normal services.

Church buildings as shrines – cp John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*. Church buildings can become pilgrim centres. How about passing them into local trust ownership? One difficulty is that people regard them as part of their personal history; another that dioceses insist on them being kept open and used because otherwise financial responsibility for upkeep would pass from the local community to the diocese...

Nick Spencer, John Finney, see multi-parish benefices as potential minster communities with a mission focus – as in the middle ages (NS, *Parochial Vision*; JF *Rediscovering the past*)

7. Together for the harvest

The future of the mixed economy: One day perhaps we will no longer think in terms of 2 categories, fresh expression and inherited mode, maybe creative relationships between the two will lead to a spectrum of inculturated expressions of church in the countryside.

Alison Morgan

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk