

Lightening the load: freeing the Church for mission

A resource for rural multi-parish benefices in the wake of Coronavirus

June 2020

This paper is an extended reflection on the positive aspects of rural ministry and forms an integral part of the “Lightening the Load” Resource which comprises an introduction, this paper and five work sessions to help churches move forward in the wake of the coronavirus. However, this paper may also have a wider stand-alone interest – hence it’s availability in advance of the full resource.

Lightening the load: a Theological Celebration of rural life, mission and ministry

This theological reflection¹ explores what is distinctive about the people, landscapes and churches of the countryside. It aims to show how wonderful and creative our rural churches and communities are - full of life and the presence of God. It offers biblical references and questions for PCCs to explore the ways in which God is already working in their communities. It is set within the context of two things: the Diocesan priorities to Grow in prayer, Make new disciples and Serve the people of Devon with joy; and the Coronavirus crisis which hit our nation in March 2020. We begin with a reflection about what God reveals to us about himself.

2.1 The nature of God

We can know nothing about the nature of God other than that which he has revealed to us. We can’t pin God down and examine him like scientists in a laboratory. Rather he comes to us and graciously lifts a veil to give us a glimpse of who he is and his desires for his creation. Our time on earth is a lifelong exploration of what God reveals about himself, and that exploration will go on throughout eternity, deeper and deeper, layer upon layer.

¹ written by Rev’d Penny Body and The Ven Dr Mark Butchers, April 2020

God reveals himself to us in his creation, through time spent with him in prayer, worship and reflection, through the calling he places on each individual's heart, but most especially through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as unfolded in the Bible. This revealing by God to us of himself has so many aspects that it cannot be contained in mere words. It transcends all we can express; it transcends time and space into eternity; it outruns us and the limitations of our human minds. But the glimpses he reveals are of a God who

- loves his creation with a love that nothing can overcome (Rom 8.38-39);
- values the material so much that he enters into the heart of it in Jesus (John 1.14);
- rejoices in the uniqueness of each individual and the rich tapestry of all he has made (Gen 1.31; 1 John 3.1-2);
- allows himself to become vulnerable, small, at risk within his creation (Luke 2.7);
- gives himself utterly in compassion for the sick, poor and marginalised and ultimately sacrifices himself even unto death (Matt 4.23-25);
- seeks out sabbath rest and times of quiet prayer (Gen 2.2-3, Mark 1.35, Luke 5.16);
- sends people out in mission and evangelism (Luke 9.1-6, 10.1-12; Matt 28.19-20);
- absorbs, heals and transforms all that is sinful, evil and death dealing on the cross... (Luke 23.32-47);
- ... and through resurrection, reveals the triumph of life over death, good over evil, hope over despair (Matt 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20 & 21);
- continues to be present to us in Word and Sacrament and through the Holy Spirit, leading us deeper into his Kingdom and the image of God in which we are made (Matt 28.20, Acts 2.1-11);
- is Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a perfect communion of love given and received (John 17.22-23, 20.22).

These themes weave their way like Celtic knotwork through the reflection which follows.

2.2 The variety of rural life

There is no one "rural" that describes everywhere outside of cities. Rural communities range from market and coastal towns serving a hinterland of villages, to large and small villages, to tiny hamlets. Irrespective of size, life experience also varies from one village to another for reasons which include transport links, access to services and population demographics.

Given that many of Jesus's parables were based on nature and agriculture, the model of the garden may be helpful here. No two gardens are ever the same. Even if they appear to have the same size and type of soil, their aspect and exposure to wind or frost may be different. Similarly no two parishes will be the same.

God rejoices in this variety – the rich tapestry of his creation. Discerning our vocation as individuals and the church is about growing into the unique people/communities God is calling us to be. We cannot "force" people into the shape we want them to be. That is equally true of church communities. What is right in one place may not be right in another. We need to acknowledge and celebrate the variety of rural communities and churches, and the mission and ministry taking place within them.

Nonetheless, we cannot have as many models of ministry as there are churches. So we also need to consider the broad similarities between rural communities and the differences between rural and urban, whilst recognising that one size will never fit all.

Another aspect of variety is that rural communities are constantly changing and evolving in response to social and economic developments (and currently of course this includes the impact of Coronavirus). Villages may look very similar to how they did 50 years ago, but their buildings will have been worked on, new people will have moved in, village groups will have ceased or new ones started, farms will have diversified. Contrary to popular perception, nothing is set in aspic: there is a constant conversation between continuity and change in rural life. Just as the risen Christ was recognisably the same and yet profoundly different, our rural communities reflect a similar mix of the traditional and the new.

2.3 The Countryside as a theological resource

One of the most obvious features of rural life is that we are surrounded by nature. The countryside forms more than a backdrop to our rural church: it is integral to our understanding of life and God. Our theology, faith and worship is incarnational - earthed in and shaped by the landscape we inhabit and the rhythms of rural life.

Seasons

In the UK the distinct seasons of the year link us to the Christian story. In spring come new growth and newborn lambs, just as we are thinking about Jesus' resurrection at Easter. In summer, colour and lushness bring the psalms and stories of God's goodness to life. In autumn at Harvest time, hedges full of berries remind us of the abundance of God's love and the glory with which he crowns the year. In winter, we are taken on the cold and lonely journey of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem and sit with the shepherds on the frosty hillside.

Through the seasons we see that life itself is seasonal; that there is a circle of birth, growth, maturity, dying and then new life once again; and that each season has its beauty and its sadness. We recognise that there is a time for everything – and that planting out of season is unlikely to bear fruit. A children's group may flourish for a time in a village, but as that cohort grows up they may not be replaced and the group will need to close. It is time to celebrate what has been good and to move on to something new. The seasons remind us that even for God incarnate in Jesus, there was a time to be born, a time to live, a time to die, a time to rise again.

Connecting to God through our landscapes

It has been said that the rural church has more of a creation than a Jesus centred spirituality. But God is Holy Trinity. In the creation in Genesis 1, the Spirit hovered over the waters and the Spirit continues to sustain us today. In the incarnation, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us - the Word through whom all things came into being (John 1). Living in the

countryside makes it easy to live in awe of God in all he has created, but also to connect to the parables Jesus told and the fruits and creativity of the Holy Spirit.

Our farmed environment gives us food for reflection about God our Father and Creator. In rural areas we know where our food comes from and how it is produced. We see the cows coming in to be milked, the lambs growing, the fields ploughed and sown, the corn growing and the harvest brought to fruition and gathered. We see both the hard work of the farmer and the handiwork of our God in all his abundant provision for us.

Our crops and fields connect us visually and directly to Jesus and his teaching. We understand the pastoral concern of the shepherds for their flocks (John 10.11). We recognise the height of the oil seed rape plant (a very close relative of the mustard plant) and can visualise what can grow from the smallest of seeds (Matt. 13.32). We see “streams of living water” springing up after the rain (e.g. Ps. 78.16 or Isa. 35.6), shafts of sunlight through the trees. We think of his Word as a “lantern for our way” (Ps. 119.15) and in the glorious sunsets we are filled with the sense of “Christ whose glory fills the sky!”

As part of our worship in the power of the Spirit we can climb the hills of Dartmoor and Exmoor or the cliffs of our coastlines for Ascension Day, beat the parish bounds at Rogation, watch the sun rise with our first service of Easter, sing in the farmyard at Harvest and make use of the inn and the stable for a walking village nativity at Christmas.

Our landscapes, our rural rhythms connect us very powerfully to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Set aside and sabbath

Set aside field margins are a place for birds, pollinators and wild flowers to recolonise areas and promote the biodiversity which is so vital for the health of our natural world. The Lundy “no-take zone” generates a greater abundance and variety of sea creatures and plants than other areas of the ocean, not only in the zone itself but in a large area around it.

The set aside, the fallow field, the no-take zone, not only rejuvenate the land or sea around them, but also remind us of the principle of Sabbath. God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2.2); we too, made in his image, need rest and re-creation; our environment needs places and times of rest and re-creation. Set aside and the ploughed field together speak of how God has ordered nature – and our lives also – to need both rest and work if we are to be fruitful.

In quiet wilderness areas of our countryside we find places to withdraw for prayer and Sabbath rest as Jesus did (Mark 1.35, Luke 5.16). We open to a sense of space which can be challenging as well as peaceful, where, like Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 4, Mark 1, Luke 4), we can be stripped of all that is superfluous in our lives in order to become more alive to God. It is no accident that those who live in urban areas come to rural areas in search of refreshment and re-creation or to go on retreat or to find Sabbath rest.

As well as Sabbath days, and Sabbath weeks, God also gives us Jubilee. The year after the seventh Sabbath year – i.e. the 50th year – is to be a Jubilee year (Lev 25). In echoes of the

Coronavirus lockdown, the people are all to return to their homes. The Jubilee is a twice century opportunity for re-setting in society. People are freed, debts are cancelled, land is redeemed. Perhaps in this Coronavirus time, we too have a particular opportunity to re-set our ministry and mission in the way of Sabbath and Jubilee.

2.4 Place, Belonging and Community

For the people of God in the Old Testament, land and place are important aspects of God's covenant with them (Deut. 6.3 and others). In the incarnation, we see God choosing to enter into his creation at a particular time and place. Belonging to a particular place is still important for rural communities and significantly affects rural worship patterns. People in a given place want to celebrate and mourn together and these activities further strengthen relationships. This is important in working out both how to sustain regular worship and how to develop locally-based worship involving the wider community at important festivals in the Christian year and for important events in the life of individual families.

Churches within a Mission Community can and do support each other very much, but that doesn't mean that all their worship needs to be combined. Prayer, pastoral care and missional activity (such as Open the Book teams) have all been shown to work really well across a Mission Community where the issue of "place" is of less importance. Sometimes for pastoral care, where confidentiality is vital, this may actually be an advantage. Other aspects of church life though need to be rooted in each individual community.

Belonging to the human community is as important as belonging to the geographical place. In many of our rural areas, farms are still family run and our farming families often form an underlying network of relationships binding communities together. Those who move from urban areas to rural often do so because they are attracted by the strength of community bonds in rural areas. It will be interesting to see whether the aftermath of the Coronavirus leads more people to move from urban areas to rural in search of community life, greater health and wellbeing and a slower pace. Coronavirus has shown that working from home is possible and as rural connectivity improves, a move to the countryside could be attractive for all sorts of reasons.

Village communities can act as powerful examples of St Paul's model of the body (1 Cor. 12). Because the community is geographically based, one belongs to the community purely by virtue of living there and all are considered important. There are examples where people whose behaviour is quite unreasonable are still nurtured and generously cared for. Elderly people are automatically looked out for. People with learning difficulties are treated with special honour and care. If one is sick, a meal will appear on the doorstep. People may not be related to each other by blood but they have many of the characteristics of an authentic family who look out for and care for each other. The Coronavirus crisis has deepened this sense of mutual care and support for one another in our communities.

In village events, multi-generational activities are normal. Whilst there may sometimes be special events for the different age groups such as a lunch club for the elderly or a youth

club for the children, by and large children and adults will be present together at village parties, fetes, sports events and so on.

In *Mission-Shaped Church*², churches are urged to change their shape whenever a new person joins so that the whole may reflect and honour what the new person brings with them. In small rural communities, this can be seen in action when a new person with different skills and interests joins. The whole is changed as the new people are included.

All of this reflects the nature of God who is that mysterious communion of persons we call the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is three persons who give and receive love to and from each other so perfectly that they are one. Our rural churches and communities echo this, imperfectly of course because we are only human; but often there is a depth to community life, community care, community support which is the envy of urban communities.

The downside to this close community life is that when things go wrong for an individual or family, it can feel like living in a goldfish bowl. There may be strong support, but there may also be gossip and criticism which is difficult to escape. There will also be times when tensions and disputes affect a village in a serious way, with arguments between families who are unable to move away, running on for years and years. Our churches are not immune to this. Like all communities and human families, rural life reflects the brokenness of human existence which led Jesus to the cross. The reconciliation God effected through Jesus' death and resurrection is at the heart of the ministry of the Church in rural areas. It is a ministry of prayer, presence and mediation, which tries to hold the brokenness and act as a channel for God's healing.

2.5 Size

Jesus famously said "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18.20). Whilst the percentage of regular churchgoers is higher in rural areas than urban areas, the rural church, like the countryside in general, will never have the "numbers" of town churches. Yet it does have great faith and spirituality, and its very smallness gives it deep penetration and reach into the community with an enviable relationship with those on the fringes.

Often we equate size with strength and consider strength as an unequivocally good thing. Yet God becomes incarnate in a tiny baby born in a stable on the edge of society, not in a palace at the centre. On numerous occasions Jesus preaches that the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matt 19.30) or praises the humble offering (Mark 12.42) or those on the margins (Matt. 5.1-10). St Paul said that "whenever I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor 12.10). It is only when we come before God knowing our weakness and in humility that we

² *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* by Graham Cray (Church House Publishing, 2009)

can properly understand our need for his mercy and compassion, and fully allow the Spirit to work through us.

In small rural churches it is important to recognise that we are not a reduced version of a big church. We are ourselves. We are perfectly sized tangerines, not undersized oranges. Smallness of numbers and community is an intrinsic part of being rural and what makes us who we are. Big or small are not better or worse but different, and they will need different models of ministry and different missional approaches in order to flourish, grow disciples and serve their communities.

Small numbers generate different opportunities for worship and mission. Jesus gathered a small band of disciples who after his death and resurrection proclaimed him throughout the nations. Twelve is a good number for living and learning together with Christ. A small group on a Sunday morning can facilitate a different, more participative style of preaching and worship. Fellowship after the service is a different experience. In small villages, churchgoers already know their neighbours in a way which is not so true of urban areas. Relationships through which the gospel can be shared are already in place.

Nonetheless, being small means the rural church often struggles organisationally and financially. Finding people to take on the traditional roles of Churchwardens and PCC officers has gradually become harder. Financially rural churches have been subsidised by the wider church, perhaps without proper understanding of this by the rural populace. This subsidy may become more difficult to sustain in the light of the Coronavirus crisis.

2.6 Worship and Spirituality

Sunday by Sunday and Special Services

As Christians we are asked to pray at all times and in all places: “from the rising of the sun to its setting, let the name of the Lord be praised.” (Ps 113.3). Regular worship is needed to sustain and develop the faith and fellowship of the Christian family, but there is often an enthusiasm for worship and spiritual events amongst the wider community in rural areas. This is deeply missional. Worship may be church-based, or it might be held on a farm or in another community space, or involve prayer walks and pilgrimage in our beautiful countryside. Focusing on the farming year as well as Christian festivals usually attracts a good proportion of people in the wider community.

By engaging with such events, people have the opportunity to hear the Christian story, to praise and give thanks to God for his goodness in the harvest, or important community events such as the blessing of a new play area for children. They also have the opportunity to develop relationships with the church family and ask questions, so that these events can become a stepping stone to deeper discipleship. With so much focus on the environment, outside worship and spirituality events also provide a good way for the church to engage with environmental concerns and to join with others of like mind.

Occasional Offices

Occasional offices continue to be of huge importance in rural communities. A farming funeral or the loss of a beloved member of a village can easily see churches filled to overflowing. For weddings the young rural diaspora often come home to their rural churches as they may have no real sense of belonging anywhere else.

The need for prayer and presence

There may be a dependency on us for prayer that we don't always recognise. Praying for individuals and our whole communities is a vital part of the work we all do. In smaller rural communities, it is sometimes easier to be aware of who needs our prayers.

Our churches are places where people are encouraged to go to pray at any time for their own needs and those of others. There is something very deep and symbolic about the presence of a place of prayer at the heart of a village.

If the Church withdraws from a community, it can cause a greater sense of loss than we may expect, and that includes the loss of being prayed for and connected to God. An example of this happened in Lynton in November 2018, when the Poor Clares convent closed causing upset in the village. They were an enclosed order, so the nuns were not in regular contact with the people, but the village knew they were there and that the nuns were praying for them. There was an appreciation of and dependence on the worship inside the convent, even if people didn't "darken the door" of a church. Now there are new sisters at the convent and the village has been delighted to welcome this new community.

Coronavirus has reminded us that the Church is more than buildings. The life of prayer and worship continues whether we can go into a church or not. Nonetheless, there is something immensely powerful about a building which has been hallowed by centuries of prayer and worship being open and accessible at the centre of our villages. Whether that can continue with reduced numbers and finances is a real concern in our rural communities. If churches do close in the coming decades in some places, the lessening or loss of those subliminal connections with God is a very real danger.

2.7 Mission and Discipleship

Making new disciples

Matthew records the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28.19) and in Luke Jesus sends his disciples to proclaim the kingdom and to heal (Luke 9.2). Discipleship is about developing a deeper relationship with God and encouraging people to take further small steps in their journeys of faith. One of our group said "how do we measure growth in discipleship? If at the end of the year more people are looking like Jesus and seeking his Kingdom, that is fulfilling the Great Commission."

Our Diocesan Strategy is to "Grow in Prayer, Make new Disciples and Serve the people of Devon with joy" with a particular emphasis on reaching people on "the fringe". A rural

church's relationship with its fringe is one of its greatest assets. Rural church leaders are likely to know a high proportion of their wider populations personally and laity are likely to be already involved with other local groups and organisations. Pastoral care and invitations to participate are facilitated by these existing relationships; the hard work of finding ways to get to know people is already done. Rural churches have a great start in mission.

Post Coronavirus, it will be interesting to see whether more people are open to exploring Christian faith in the years to come. It looks like more people engaged with online worship than usually attend Church during the crisis. Have priorities shifted? Will making new disciples become more likely? There is a new landscape to navigate and new opportunities may open up.

Serving the people of Devon with joy

In rural areas, serving the people of Devon with joy is most often carried out naturally as part of the church's day to day life. One member of our group, in describing his community, said: "people are gentle – rural people may not "talk" theology but their care and love is present." He described a village wedding where the congregation had polished, cleaned and loved the church to support the wedding couple and their guests; and a funeral where the coffin rested in church and a parishioner volunteered to keep a prayer vigil all night. Such spirituality is simple, pure and rich. It may not be articulated in words but is a lived theology.

When we look for the Kingdom of God in rural communities, we find it in small words of comfort, smiles of encouragement, forgiveness and unselfish care. It is this myriad of mustard seeds that grow to make up the kingdom of God (Mark 4.30-32). This is often meat and drink in the supportive networks of rural communities. But how can we encourage people to go deeper still in exploring God's Kingdom of mercy, compassion, justice, healing, freedom from oppression, forgiveness and reconciliation through Jesus Christ?

The countryside faces many social and economic challenges relating to isolation, transport, local employment opportunities, low paid work in agriculture and hospitality, affordable housing for younger people and families, viability of village schools and particular forms of rural crime.³

Many of these challenges will be viewed as part of normal life and not something that needs a particular response by members of the community. It is likely that significant numbers of the congregation will have direct personal experience of these issues. As the "problem" seems natural, so can the response be too. For example, rural social isolation and loneliness is a significant issue. Churches have long run regular coffee mornings, lunch clubs and social events which are open to anyone in the community, with people who might struggle to attend being offered lifts and welcome. This is one of the ways the rural church serves the

³ For a fuller account of these issues and ideas for the Church's response, see the Devon Churches Rural Forum report "*Aspects of Life in Torridge and North Devon and the Church's Response*" which can be found at <https://www.devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/rural-issues/about-rural-devon/about-rural-devon.php>

people of Devon with joy – but they may not see it as that, rather just a natural expression of rural life.

Intentional action is also needed. Many of the issues such as loneliness, poverty and domestic abuse in rural areas are referred to as “hidden” - perhaps because they are not as obvious in the midst of the beautiful countryside as they may be on an inner city street. In his ministry Jesus was always alert to the sick, the weak, the marginalised and spoke out robustly about matters of justice. The deep knowledge rural churches have of their communities, their incarnational nature and connections within the community make them particularly well placed both to serve and to speak out on behalf of their people within an overall vision of God’s Kingdom of justice and equality.

2.8 Ecumenism

Jesus prayed that we may be one (John 17.11) and Psalm 133.1 reminds us “how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity”. This reflection is too short for a full exploration of the possibilities for ecumenism, but its reality is joyfully manifested in rural communities in many ways. Whereas in a town there may be a full range of denominational churches where people may worship, this is less so in the countryside. Very often Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Roman Catholics (to name only a few) will naturally worship together.

All denominations are facing similar issues about lack of resources, and this may well become even more acute in the wake of Coronavirus. Close working together in worship and service to the community, particularly between Anglican and Methodist churches, has been important for many years for practical reasons as well as theological ones. In the process, deep bonds of love and trust have been established in many villages. It has been described as “ecumenism without the committees”.

Whilst there are certain structural issues to consider, when we come together as the united Body of Christ in a place, we express the truth of God’s unity and there are Gospel as well as practical reasons to work together wherever we can. Any reflection about “lightening the load” ought to include an ecumenical dimension.

2.9 Buildings

We have already touched on church buildings a little. As well as being a cause of concern, the church building can also be a great asset. In rural areas, they are a focal point in the community and they signify that God is present and worshipped there. We know the Church is about people, community, love for our neighbour; but buildings have their role to play as well. James Mustard the Precentor at Exeter Cathedral recently said: ‘I reject the claim that “the church is not about buildings”. The Exeter Book describes churches as “*leomo*

laemena”, limbs of clay: the church Body, fashioned of the same clay (*limmus*) as Adam. People and churches: living and compacted clay, both fashioned for prayer and praise.⁴

Across the country, rural churches are being used to serve the community in numerous ways as well as for worship – such as a post office, police outpost or a meeting place for groups – though of course it helps if churches can be fitted with toilets, basic kitchen facilities and heating.

People in the wider community are often willing to contribute to the upkeep of the building and churchyard. In one village a “Thank You” evening was held to celebrate the work of all those who contribute to church life and 54 people came together, of whom only 4 were regular churchgoers. The rest were people who offered time and talents in cleaning, grass cutting, flower arranging, bell ringing, fund raising, historical interpretation and so on. This working together offers a natural way to help build community and to bring people on the fringe closer to the spiritual as well as the practical side of the church. Somehow mission and outreach happens more often and more naturally in rural communities.

The buildings also exercise a “ministry of the empty church”. Many people come into open churches to find a place of quiet or to pray. The buildings, and their adjoining churchyards, are seen as “thin spaces”.

Buildings are theologically important in the rural church, but are clearly also a drain on resources. Will Coronavirus have made our local communities appreciate them more? Or will people feel that the Church can exist without them, or at least some of them? Only time will tell. If the church building continues to be critical for the ongoing life of the Church in rural areas, then how can we find a sustainable model for the management and maintenance of the building? How can we lighten the load on a very few, often elderly, regular church members? The Growing the Rural Church Project is a marvellous asset in exploring these questions.

2.10 Pruning and Sustainability

Rural ministry is busy and demanding. One person asked the question “is the rural church more like Martha than Mary?” (Luke 10.38-42). The answer is probably that most churches are more like Martha than Mary, and that none of us spend enough time sitting at Jesus’s feet as Mary did, drinking in all that he has to teach us. But this may be particularly acute in rural churches where there are fewer people to undertake the practical tasks of church life.

Our faith is about death and resurrection. This should encourage us to let some things go in order to leave room for something new. Jesus spoke about the vine and the gardener, and how every branch that does not bear fruit should be cut off and every branch that does bear fruit should be pruned so that it can bear even more fruit (John 15). Pruning of existing work in churches may well be necessary in order to focus on key priorities or take on any new ones.

⁴ https://twitter.com/mustard_james/status/1256467191127564288?s=20 [Accessed 26 May 2020].

2.11 Conclusions

The reflections above show that rural mission and ministry is distinctive, with different strengths compared to more urban/suburban ministry. It has so much vitality to offer to the life of the Church. Certainly, it has huge challenges of lack of resources, too few people to fill roles, challenging buildings to maintain, not to mention the challenges of Coronavirus, only seen as yet in a glass darkly. And yet there is much to celebrate:

- the natural connections we can make with God through the landscape, the seasons, places of re-creation;
- the depth and quality of rural community life which echoes the giving and receiving of love within God as Trinity and St Paul's image of the Body of Christ;
- the smaller size of communities which can lead to deep relationships, creative worship and mission opportunities;
- the willingness of the wider community to engage with special acts of worship;
- the rural church's intimate relationship with its fringe, which gives a strong foundation for mission and evangelism;
- long-standing ecumenical relationships;
- church buildings which stand as incarnate signs of the presence of God at the heart of a community and offer a silent ministry of space and prayer.

All of this reflects a sacramental quality about rural church life. A sacrament such as the consecrated bread and wine of Communion, is something visible and physical which, by God's grace and blessing, points beyond itself to that which is eternal, abiding, ever true. It is heaven touching earth, a meeting point between us and God like the neck of an hour glass where God pours into us his strength and healing, his forgiveness and peace.

The rural church and rural life is earthy, rooted in the landscape, planted in the soil. And yet through something so down to earth, God points us beyond to glimpse eternal truths:

- in the rural landscape, we see the glory, goodness and abundance of God our Creator;
- through our close-knit communities and all we do in love one for another, we touch the hem of the mutual giving and receiving of love that is the essential nature of God;
- through our very smallness and fragility, we sense the humility and vulnerability of God incarnate in Jesus;
- in the set aside and quiet spaces, we get a foretaste of the Sabbath rest that awaits us with God;
- in our church buildings and the worship that soars within them, we feel the presence of God and know we are held by an eternal love that will never let us go.

These are eternal truths, timeless and transcendent, which God reveals to us in and through the life of the rural church.

None of this is to romanticise rural church life. Many aspects are hard: we feel the burdens and we know the tensions and disputes which can beset our rural communities. Like all human life, there is a lot which needs laying at the foot of the cross for God's redeeming, forgiving and resurrecting. This is another aspect of our fragility and vulnerability.

Yet, through the blessing and guiding of the Holy Spirit, rural life and the rural church manage to point sacramentally beyond themselves to God and his Kingdom in a particularly focussed way. Eternal truths weave like Celtic knotwork through our church and community life, sometimes radiant, sometimes dimly seen, sometimes waiting to be revealed. Alleluia!