# Released for Mission



THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Growing the Rural Church

# Contents

# Rural Multi-Church Ministry in the 21st Century

## Foreword

The Church of England is defined by its commitment to being a church for everyone, living out its vocation to be 'a Christian presence in every community,' as our website strapline puts it. We seek to offer worship, pastoral care and prophetic witness in every place. The parish church represents our commitment to provide a place of prayer for all, at the heart of the community, which affirms local identity, giving people a sense of place and belonging. Rural society is not static – indeed it is changing as fast as in our cities and towns, but place and community are important for many people, as the significant inward migration to rural areas might suggest.

65% of Church of England churches (10199) and 66% of our parishes (8394) are in rural areas of England. Multi-church groups are an outcome of our continuing commitment to every community, combined with the reality of scarce resources, both of ordained clergy and finance. 70.1% of all churches are in now multi-church groups. Rural ministry holds numerous challenges and the multi-church group has not received the degree of analysis and attention that would help demonstrate best practice and reveal helpful changes to facilitate growth. That is the purpose of the major research project led by the National Rural Officer, Canon Dr Jill Hopkinson, which is outlined in this report. It has adopted both a quantitative and qualitative approach to reveal a picture of challenge and optimism, faithfulness and innovation in rural multi-church groups. The voices of clergy and lay people combine here with a statistical analysis to paint a more comprehensive picture of rural ministry than has been attempted for some time.

Often, when the Church of England talks about its structures, ministry and mission, the distinctive aspects of the rural church are forgotten and the model of church we talk about has more of the characteristics of suburbia where people tend to choose the church they go to and where the clergy expect to have one building, one community and one congregational membership. The result is that our approaches to mission, ministry and growth often miss the potential of rural parishes. Certainly, there are some particular challenges which rural multi-church groups face around geography, multiplication and complexity that, if not addressed, may hinder mission and growth. Models of ministry which assume one church per priest are not effective in such contexts and clergy have mostly had to forge their own way ahead in order to offer effective parish ministry across numerous communities and large distances.

The ministry of lay people is vital to mission and ministry in rural communities but is often hampered by small numbers of volunteers and the absence of suitable support and training. Whilst there is an urgent need for a new focus on discipleship across the whole church, this and the continued development of the ministry of lay people are inevitable and essential priorities for the rural church. Attention needs to be given urgently to how discipleship is best engendered and encouraged in these distinctive contexts.

The picture painted by this research gives many grounds for optimism and hope. It is a picture of clergy fired by the imperative for mission and

growth but who are struggling to find ways to give it the time it needs when the demands of a scattered population, bureaucracy, many buildings and social change in rural communities can be all absorbing. It is a picture of committed lay people, embedded in the lives of their communities, for whom the activities of the church are integral to their lives as neighbours. In every rural community we dare to believe that Christians are making a difference in Christ's name. There is much here to celebrate and even more to build upon. However, the challenges of small, often older congregations, several church buildings to look after and the need to develop a mixed economy approach must not be underestimated. The traditional model of ministry cannot simply be stretched *ad infinitum* but must be rethought in a way that is authentic to the place and people to whom the church is reaching out. Instead of seeing multi-church groups as instances of decline and despair, there is much evidence here to suggest that they can be vanguards in rethinking mission and ministry for the rural communities of England today.

The experience of rural multi-church groups is that ministry and mission resulting in thriving, growing, congregations has a distinctive character and requires specific skills and approaches. Proper training for rural mission and ministry in multi-church groups, for lay people as well as clergy, is another essential. This cannot just happen in Phases 1 and 2 of Initial Ministerial Education or as part of Continuing Ministerial Development, although they are important. We need a change in the paradigm of training. Preparation for priestly ministry that is based on a model of a single community and church should no longer be seen as the norm. When over two-thirds of churches are in multi-church groups it is unrealistic not to train new clergy for multiple contexts.

As this report shows, clergy and laity alike in rural multi-church groups have had to learn how to negotiate a better balance between what is familiar and what is possible. The result has often been the start of new life in the parish and congregation,

and new energy for mission. In other places there remains a reluctance to recognise realities and an inertia which drains energy, enthusiasm and potential from everyone. This report has revealed areas where urgent attention is needed to help liberate the rural church still further so that its potential for growth can be realised. We identify five priorities.

## One:

Building a culture of discipleship appropriate to the rural context.

## Two:

Envisioning, enabling and equipping the ministry of lay people.

## Three:

Effective training, support and resourcing for clergy and lay people in rural multi-church groups.

## Four:

The simplification of governance and legal structures, the requirements for officers and the need for administrative resourcing.

## Five:

Facilitation of creative ecumenical partnerships.

This requires the church nationally to reconceive its ministry, rethink how it trains its ministers and how it releases them for mission. The way administration is delivered needs to be reimagined. Organisational changes can make the legal structures for multi-church groups more effective and liberating. Because there is a higher ratio of buildings to clergy and church officers in multi-church groups, simplifying the processes through which buildings are maintained, adapted and managed will free an immense amount of energy for the kind of missional endeavours that too often get squeezed off the agenda. In many rural communities the only effective Christian presence will be an ecumenical one. We need to address the barriers – local, diocesan and national – that

prevent this from happening. In these ways, there is much the national church could do to help the rural church achieve its potential for mission and growth.

A Christian presence in every community is more than a strap-line – it is the heart of English Anglicanism. It is the expression of our obligation, as the church for all the people of the nation, to leave no community untouched by the gospel of Jesus Christ, lived out among the people of every place. Ministry and mission in the rural church is highly demanding of energy and imagination. Growth is being realised, but much more remains to be done. The recommendations in this report are practical and achievable. They provide a short agenda for change to liberate

the impetus for mission in rural communities and affirm the huge potential for growth of the rural church within the Church of England.

With Synod's support, the Rural Affairs Group of General Synod, the National Rural Officer and Mission and Public Affairs will take the recommendations forward and seek to implement them effectively so that the rural church can thrive.

The Rt Revd James Bell
Bishop of Knaresborough
Chair, Rural Affairs Group of General Synod

January 2015

# Executive Summary

This research was developed to explore whether mission and growth were possible within rural multi-church groups. The report describes the reality of rural multi-church ministry as experienced by lay and ordained alike, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and makes recommendations to address blockages to mission and growth.

Mission and growth are possible in rural multi-church groups where time and space is created for it to take place and where the ministry of lay people is enabled and equipped.

Rural[1] parishes make up two-thirds of the Church of England (there are 10,199 rural church buildings), almost all of which are within multi-church groups of varying sizes and structures. 42% of clergy serve rural parishes. Using the measure of average weekly attendance, 40% attend parishes in rural communities.

When measured over a ten year period, similar proportions of rural and urban churches experience growth or decline: 18% of rural parishes were found to be growing (18% of urban parishes) with 25% of rural parishes declining (29% of urban parishes). A similar proportion of rural parishes in single parish benefices and multi-parish benefices experienced either growth (18%) or decline (26%). As the numbers of parishes experiencing numerical growth are small in total, urgent attention needs to be given to releasing the expertise, time and energy of lay and ordained alike, for mission in rural communities

The rural multi-church groups within this study used a wide range of contextually relevant approaches to outreach and mission. The mixed economy was very important and sustaining regular worship was a key part of this. Fresh expressions were enthusiastically being developed and priority was often given to establishing relationships with children and young people through schools and Messy Church.

The larger scale multi-church group has the potential to support mission and ministry in each parish through facilitating the sharing of ideas and expertise and the creation of a critical mass to support events and activities. However, tensions can arise for both ordained and lay in balancing relationships with the individual parishes and the multi-church group as a whole. Many rural multi-church groups would benefit from a process to find a collective identity, learn how to operate collegially and share resources.

Mission and ministry in rural multi-church groups works best when mission springs from an incarnational approach to the relationship between church and the community at large, and a leadership style that adopts a broadly episcopal model. Clergy are not currently trained for the reality and complexity of leading multiple churches and so would benefit from specific training to work in (rural) multi-church groups and to develop an enabling and equipping style of leadership that seeks to grow and facilitate the discipleship and ministry of lay people.

The burden of administration, financial management and legal requirements is generally too heavy for clergy and lay people alike, taking up a considerable amount of time and energy. Multi-church groups would benefit from the creation of staff posts which address administration, financial accounting, building and churchyard management on behalf of the whole group. This should be seen as an enabling resource which releases time and energy amongst clergy and lay people and should therefore be a legitimate call on mission funding.

A thorough review of legal governance structures and the requirement for many officeholders within a multi-church group needs to be carried out urgently. This should aim to simplify structures and processes, make recommendations on efficient governance mechanisms and reduce the number of office holders and formal meetings required.

Church buildings can be both a blessing and a burden which falls primarily on the congregation and clergy. Urgent attention needs to be given to a strategy for their future management, as well as continuing the work to sustain buildings through extended community use.

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[1] Based on Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs 2011 Rural – Urban Classification
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/2011-rural-urban-classification

# Introduction

1. The purpose of this research was to explore whether mission and growth were possible within rural multi-church groups, and if so how. This project set out to describe the reality of multi-church ministry as experienced by lay and ordained alike, in both quantitative and qualitative terms; identify positive experiences and make recommendations for action on issues of concern.

2. Multi-church ministry in its various forms is a much used strategy for managing pastoral organisation and clergy deployment in rural areas. Increasingly, multi-church structures are also found in urban and suburban locations. However there is very little understanding and limited data on the relationship between multi-church ministry, clergy deployment, church attendance, ministry, mission and growth.

3. The Archbishops' Council priorities include a focus on numerical and spiritual growth. If churches in multi-church situations are to experience growth, an understanding of how they function is essential, as is appreciating and learning from the experience of clergy and lay people who lead and worship in these situations.

4. The intention of this work is to inform both policy and practice for diocesan bodies and parochial church councils, reflect on the key issues that arise and make recommendations for the future.

5. The qualitative data which this report draws on is from 47 interviews of clergy and lay people from 35 rural multi-church groupings in six dioceses in the autumn of 2010 and spring of 2011. These were conducted by Naomi Maynard a post-graduate researcher who worked with the Research and Statistics Department. As a guarantee of anonymity was given to all participants the dioceses in which the interviews took place have not been identified.

6. The quantitative data analysis was completed by Louise McFerran and Hannah Kirk from the Research and Statistics Department of the Archbishops' Council. The figures are based on parish returns from 2011, the 2011 Census data and the revised Defra rural definitions of 2013.

7. A full methodology is available for both the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research.

8. This research was started before the concept of focal ministry had risen to prominence and so it is relevant to note that none of the multi-church groups in this study operated this style of ministry.

# What is the size of the rural church?

9.  The Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs differentiates rural from urban areas by a measure of population size and density (revised 2013)[2]. A settlement with a population of 10,000 or less is defined as being rural, with three sub categories of rural town and fringe settlements; villages; hamlets and dispersed dwellings. The population density across a 30km radius is used to determine whether an area is less sparsely populated (most of rural England) or sparsely populated. The sparse areas are found in the northern uplands, Welsh border areas, the south west and parts of eastern England.

10. Using this definition the Office for National Statistics have calculated that the population of rural England is 9.3 million people (17.6% of the population of England), with 570,000 people living in sparsely populated rural areas. Rural populations continue to grow by around 50,000 people each year. However, the rural population has a higher age profile with more than half the rural population aged over 45 (less than 40% of the urban population are over 45). There is a significant loss of the younger generations from rural communities who leave to continue their education, find work and housing. In urban areas 21.2% of the population are aged 15 to 29 years, but in rural areas this falls to 14.6% of the population. Similar proportions of children aged under 14 years are present in rural and urban areas 16.2% and 18% respectively.

11. Table 1 shows that two-thirds (66%) of all Church of England parishes are in rural areas (as defined by the Defra rural definition of 2013). 65% of church buildings are in rural areas and 48% of benefices. 67% of deaneries are in rural areas.

12. The rural church makes up a large proportion of Church of England buildings, parishes and deaneries. This reflects the historic provision of a place of worship in almost every settlement (as a guide at the end of 2010 there were 10479 civil parishes in England, the majority of which were in rural areas). Benefices in rural areas often contain a large number of parishes, which is reflected in the lower proportion of rural benefices.

The rural church has:

**10199 churches**

**8394 parishes**



13. Table 2 shows that 57% of incumbent status stipendiary priests (Vicar, Rector, Priest in Charge, Team Rector, Team Vicar) work in urban areas. 53% of self-supporting clergy (including House for Duty and Ordained Local Minister) work in urban areas. 69% of stipendiary assistant curates (including stipendiary curates in IME Phase 2, Assistant Priests or Ministers, Assistant Curates) work in urban areas.

**Table 1: Number and proportion of church buildings, parishes and benefices that are present in rural and urban areas**

|  | Churches | % | Parishes | % | Benefices | % | Deaneries | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 10199 | 65 | 8394 | 66 | 3523 | 48 | 467 | 67 |
| **Urban** | 5535 | 35 | 4378 | 34 | 3761 | 52 | 225 | 33 |
| **Total** | **15734** | | **12772** | | **7284** | | **692** | |

[2] Based on Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs 2011 Rural – Urban Classification
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/2011-rural-urban-classification

church are female (37% in urban areas). 56% of rural self-supporting clergy are female (52% in urban areas). Over three-quarters of higher status posts of incumbent or equivalent are held by men in rural areas. This may reflect the still comparatively recent nature of women's ordination but the full significance of this requires further investigation.

16. Half of female stipendiary incumbents work in rural areas but only 40% of male incumbents work in rural areas (Table 4). One third (33%) of female assistant curates work in rural areas, 30% of male assistant curates work in rural areas. As there is no statistical significance between the figures no firm conclusions can be drawn at this stage but further research could establish reasons behind the gender distribution.

17. Tables 5 and 6 present data for numbers on the Electoral Roll and attendance.

14. The majority of clergy work in larger towns and cities where large populations are present. There are more assistant priests available to churches in urban areas; more than twice as many. Both rural and urban areas benefit from the ministry of self-supporting priests, but the difference in numbers are much less marked.

18. Two thirds of parishes are rural but just under half (46%) of the Church of England's total Electoral Roll members are in rural parishes. This is higher than attendance

15. Table 3 shows that 26% of stipendiary incumbent status priests in the rural church are female (19% in the urban church). 40% of stipendiary assistant curates in the rural

**Table 2: Number and proportion of stipendiary incumbent status priests, stipendiary assistant curates and self-supporting priests in rural and urban areas**

|  | Incumbent | % | Asst. Curate | % | Self-supporting | % | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 2524 | 43 | 451 | 31 | 1397 | 47 | 4372 | 42 |
| **Urban** | 3409 | 57 | 1006 | 69 | 1572 | 53 | 5987 | 58 |
| **Total** | **5933** |  | **1457** |  | **2969** |  | **10359** |  |

**Table 3: The proportion (as percentage) of urban and rural incumbents, assistant curates and self-supporting ministers that are male and female**

|  | Incumb Female % | Incumb Male % | Incumb Total % | Asst. Curate Female % | Asst. Curate Male % | Asst. Curate Total % | SSM Female % | SSM Male % | SSM Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 26 | 74 | 43 | 40 | 60 | 31 | 56 | 44 | 47 |
| **Urban** | 19 | 81 | 57 | 37 | 63 | 69 | 52 | 48 | 53 |
| **Total** | **22** | **78** | **(5933)** | **38** | **62** | **(1457)** | **54** | **46** | **(2969)** |

**Table 4: Number and proportion of stipendiary incumbent status priests, stipendiary assistant curates and self-supporting priests in rural and urban areas by gender**

| | Incumbent Female | % | Incumbent Male | % | Asst. Curate Female | % | Asst. Curate Male | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 648 | 50 | 1876 | 40 | 181 | 33 | 270 | 30 |
| **Urban** | 645 | 50 | 2764 | 60 | 369 | 67 | 637 | 70 |
| **Total** | **1293** | | **4640** | | **550** | | **907** | |
| | Self-support Female | % | Self-support Male | % | | | Grand Total | % |
| **Rural** | 779 | 49 | 618 | 45 | | | 4372 | 42 |
| **Urban** | 819 | 51 | 753 | 55 | | | 5987 | 58 |
| **Total** | **1598** | | **1371** | | | | **10359** | |

*\* The difference between the electoral roll and average attendance of rural and urban parishes is statistically significantly different at the 95% confidence level.*

figures as there is a historic tendency for rural residents to join the electoral roll but attend worship infrequently.

19. Regular attendance at parishes in rural areas was recorded using a wide range of measures. For simplicity the figures presented below are for average weekly attendance (AWA). As AWA can fluctuate figures are shown for minimum, maximum as well as average attendance. This gives an indication of the size of the core congregation, the biggest reach of the parish and the general pattern of attendance. However, particularly for churches in rural multi-church groups additional limitations need to be understood, including that there may be several churches in a parish (in the case of a united parish), that worship may not happen every week and that monthly or quarterly services such as Messy Church may not be recorded in the figures.

**Table 5: The percentage of parochial attendance that is rural and urban (2011)**

| % | Parishes | Electoral Roll* | Min. attendance | Max. attendance | Average* attendance | Sum of attendance | Christmas attendance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 66 | 46 | 37 | 43 | 40 | 39 | 49 |
| **Urban** | 34 | 54 | 63 | 57 | 60 | 61 | 51 |

*\*The difference between the electoral roll and average attendance of rural and urban parishes is statistically significantly different at the 95% confidence level.*

**Table 6: The count of parochial attendance that is rural and urban**

| | Parishes | Electoral Roll* | Min. attendance | Max. attendance | Average* attendance | Sum of attendance | Christmas attendance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 8394 | 537,200 | 233,600 | 574,400 | 367,700 | 1,388,700 | 1,101,600 |
| **Urban** | 4378 | 622,500 | 398,600 | 770,800 | 549,200 | 2,193,500 | 1,139,300 |
| **Total** | **12772** | **1,159,600** | **632,200** | **1,345,200** | **916,900** | **3,582,200** | **2,240,800** |

*\* The difference between the electoral roll and average attendance of rural and urban parishes is statistically significantly different at the 95% confidence level.*

20. The average attendance shows that 40% of worshippers are found in rural parishes. The minimum attendance in rural parishes accounts for 37% of worshippers but the maximum figure is 43%. However, seasonal attendance at Christmas is higher with nearly half of worshippers attending rural parishes.

21. Statistical tests show that in an average urban parish both average attendance and electoral roll are meaningfully larger than for an average rural parish (95% confidence).

# Can rural churches grow?

22. In the analysis presented here three measures of average weekly attendance per parish were used (minimum, maximum and total). Average weekly attendance figures can mask overall changes. However a change in minimum AWA could indicate either growth or decline of the core congregation, maximum attendance could indicate a change in fringe attendance and the sum of four weeks of attendance provides an indication of the reach of the parish. These three measures of AWA were calculated over five and ten year periods. They cannot show the magnitude of growth or decline, but indicate where there was sufficient positive or negative change to consider it to be more than just usual fluctuations. Parishes were therefore classed as positive (growing), negative (declining) or inconclusive (either a stable pattern or one with fluctuations that prevent a conclusion

being drawn). The size of the existing parish was also taken into account so that smaller congregations had a higher threshold to meet to show consistent growth:

- 0 – 15 AWA: 30%
- 16 – 199 AWA: 20%
- 200+ AWA: 10%

23. Note that the data are only collected by parish not by individual church, so that where there are for example, four churches in one parish the attendance figures for that parish are from all four churches. Where there are several parishes in a multi-church group, data is recorded for each parish separately.

24. Using this method 18% of all parishes were found to be experiencing growth, this figure being identical for urban and rural parishes. 26% were declining and 52% showed inconclusive results (Table 7). The percentage of rural and urban parishes experiencing decline is statistically significantly different at the 95% confidence level. However, this statistically significant difference was not repeated when measured over 5 years.

Churches showing growth over 10 years:

**Rural 18%**
**Urban 18%**

25. 18% of parishes, whether they were in rural or urban areas experienced growth according to the measures used. Significantly more urban parishes experienced decline than those in rural areas (95% confidence level) but only when

**Table 7: Growth outcomes measured over 10 years – the percentage of rural and urban parishes that are growing or declining**

| % | Negative | Positive | Inconclusive | No outcome | Total | All parishes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural** | 25 | 18 | 54 | 3 | 100 | 8394 |
| **Urban** | 29 | 18 | 49 | 4 | 100 | 4378 |
| **All parishes** | 26 | 18 | 52 | 4 | 100 | 12772 |
| **Grand total** | **3339** | **2294** | **6682** | **457** | **12772** | |

**Table 8: Growth outcomes measured over 10 years – the number and percentage of parishes that are growing or declining in benefices of varying numbers of parishes**

| Parishes per benefice | Negative | % | Positive | % | Inconclusive | % | No outcome | % | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1385 | 27 | 985 | 20 | 2585 | 51 | 94 | 2 | 5049 |
| 2 | 551 | 29 | 313 | 16 | 1002 | 52 | 48 | 3 | 1914 |
| 3 | 394 | 26 | 253 | 17 | 824 | 55 | 17 | 1 | 1488 |
| 4 | 319 | 25 | 215 | 17 | 703 | 56 | 15 | 1 | 1252 |
| 5-10 | 582 | 24 | 436 | 18 | 1323 | 55 | 58 | 2 | 2399 |
| 11+ | 81 | 14 | 72 | 13 | 195 | 35 | 214 | 38 | 562 |
| Unknown | 27 | 25 | 20 | 19 | 50 | 46 | 11 | 10 | 108 |
| **Total** | **3339** | **26** | **2294** | **18** | **6682** | **52** | **457** | **4** | **12772** |

measured over a ten year period. This was not repeated when change was examined over a five year period so the finding needs to be treated with caution and it is not possible to draw general conclusions from it. However both data sets indicate that similar proportions of urban and rural churches experience growth, decline or inconclusive findings.

26. The number of parishes within a benefice or team was examined as a factor influencing growth (Table 8). Although single parish benefices were more likely to grow than parishes in multi-parish groups, when measured over a ten year period (statistically significant difference at 95% confidence level), this was not repeated over a timescale of five years. As a result it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from these findings. However, where there are two or more parishes in a benefice or team, there appears to be little statistical effect on the likelihood of growth or decline.

27. Table 9 shows that a similar proportion of rural parishes in single and multi-parish benefices experienced growth (18%). Urban parishes in multi-parish benefices were statistically more likely to be in decline than urban single parish benefices (also statistically significant at the 95% confidence level). However, these findings were not replicated when growth was compared over a five year period and as a result it is not possible to draw firm conclusions.

28. These data give an indication of the complexity of measuring growth and decline in multi-church and multi-parish situations. The results should be treated with caution and further research work is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn. It is clear that growth is possible in all pastoral arrangements and structures, decline is not a guaranteed outcome. However, given the small proportions of parishes that are experiencing growth urgent attention needs to be paid to assist more of them to grow.

**Table 9: Growth outcomes measured over 10 years – the number and percentage of rural and urban parishes that are growing or declining**

| Growth outcome | Parishes in multi parish benefice | | | | | Parishes in single parish benefice | | | | | All parishes |
| | Rural | % | Urban | % | Total | Rural | % | Urban | % | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Negative | 1644 | 24 | 283 | 32 | 1927 | 430 | 27 | 955 | 27 | 1385 | 3339 |
| Positive | 1182 | 18 | 107 | 12 | 1289 | 291 | 18 | 694 | 20 | 985 | 2294 |
| Inconclusive | 3667 | 54 | 380 | 44 | 4047 | 829 | 53 | 1756 | 51 | 2585 | 6682 |
| No outcome | 249 | 4 | 103 | 12 | 352 | 26 | 2 | 68 | 2 | 94 | 457 |
| **Total** | **6742** | | **873** | | **7615** | **1576** | | **3473** | | **5049** | **12772** |

# Context, history and community

29. Rural England is a diverse place with great differences between individual places and landscape areas. Rural communities are often popular and good places to live. Statistically, if you live in a rural area you are less likely to be unemployed, have a low income, be in receipt of benefits, be without qualifications or skills, have a baby before the age of 16, die prematurely, be anxious, homeless or live in fear of crime. Escalating house prices in villages and hamlets over the last 20 years, particularly in less sparsely populated areas adjacent to towns and cities, confirms a desire for many to live in the countryside. Sparsely populated areas, have higher proportions of households on low incomes. Disadvantage is dispersed and usually difficult to identify. Isolation and loneliness are increasing problems in many rural communities.



*"Our parish priest has 13 churches and he spends half his life in a car! And he's never going to get to know our individual people here as if he's only seeing the people who go to church once a month. He's never going to meet the people who don't go to church."*

30. One of the biggest factors in rural ministry is the number of churches within a grouping. Multi-church groups frequently have between three and nine churches with larger groups of churches, 11 or more, becoming increasingly common. The distance and travel time between different communities and churches can be long and time consuming. Many multi-church groupings can cover hundreds of square miles, with tens of miles between each church. Even where churches are closer together a round trip of 20 miles would not be uncommon between services in different churches.

31. This highlights three of the pressures of distance and multiplication, felt by all the clergy interviewed:

    • the pressure to conduct as many services as possible on a Sunday

    • the difficulty in getting to know congregations when there is no time to talk after the service

    • the need to find alternative ways and additional time to do this and to get to know the wider community.

32. There remains a common perception amongst congregations, communities and to a certain extent amongst clergy, that even up to the mid-twentieth century there was one priest per parish church and therefore as a result attendance at church was much higher. With the exception of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (when there was indeed one priest for every church in every settlement) and the latter part of the nineteenth century, clergy numbers in the Church of England have never been high enough to attain this ratio.[3]

[3] Anthony Russell, (1993) The Country Parson, London, SPCK p. 3

33. The creation of multi-church groups from the late 1940s onwards, has been as the direct result of the decline in the number of ordained ministers and the numbers available for deployment within the confines of the Sheffield Formula (1974). This latter development resulted in a considerable reduction of the numbers of clergy working in rural areas during the 1970s and 1980s.

34. The rural church has historically been deeply integrated into rural community life. The patterns of worship and activity reflected the changing of the seasons and the rhythms of community life, as much as the Christian year. Whilst the remnants of this integration remain, for example in the practice of Rogation and the importance of Christmas and harvest festival, rural community life is vastly different today from what it was.



At their best rural church and community are deeply integrated

35. At their best, rural congregations are embedded in the life of their communities. Members of rural congregations are involved in many different organisations, events, groups and networks. These include Parish Council, school Governors, clubs or teams, the WI, children's groups, fete committee etc. This incarnational approach embeds the church into community life through its congregation members, rather than being present as an institution with official representation.

*"So when you look at the rural church you may think 'well there are very few people in the pews' but when you look at what the church is actually involved in, in the community, it puts the whole thing into perspective and you realize the church is actually very much more active than it first appears."*

36. This implicit Christian presence in the community was seen as a normal part of life by most congregation members and not as a separate Christian activity. Many clergy respondents commented that it was often difficult to help congregations link this activity with a practical outworking



of Christian faith. In multi-church groups this integration of church with community took on an even greater importance as an essential part of developing mission and ministry.

37. Many interviewees commented that it was the same people who ran different groups and activities within the community and the church. This is both a current limitation and potential future problem for both rural church and community. A small number of interviewees commented that one or more of the churches in a multi-church group was separate from the wider community. This was either because the congregation had developed a closed club mentality or simply because the wider community chose not to get involved with the church or support it in any way.

# Worship

38. Maintaining regular services of worship on a Sunday was the main priority in all the multi-church groups studied, but each group approached this differently. The most common approach was a mixed pattern of clergy led Eucharist and lay led services of the word. In some groups all types of worship were still predominantly led by clergy, including family services and matins.



39. Most multi-church groups operated a monthly or two-monthly rota of varying complexity. In larger villages and market towns worship took place every Sunday. Smaller settlements were most likely to have fortnightly or monthly Sunday worship. Irregular worship patterns, with times of services varying each week, were used frequently to maintain clergy led worship.

40. Agreeing the rota of services was not always straight forward, particularly where there was an absence of collegiality in the group, tensions between the individual churches and a reluctance to travel to worship in other parishes or use other styles. Joint services were used frequently for the fifth Sunday in a month, or less frequently as part of a monthly rota.

41. All of the respondents reported congregations for Sunday worship varying from around 5 to, for churches in the bigger settlements, 50 – 80. Whilst absolute numbers were generally small, the numbers attending may well have represented a reasonable proportion of the village residents, with 5 – 10% or more of those living in the parish attending.

42. Worship was both traditional in form (following the Book of Common Prayer) and contemporary, with extensive use of Common Worship for both Holy Communion and services of the Word. There was an encouraging amount of variation and diversity in the range of styles of worship offered including café church, family services, morning prayer, matins, Iona and Taizé style services and sung Eucharist or evensong. In addition there were mid-week services, ecumenical services for special occasions or community events, services for parents and toddlers, services in nursing or other care homes, regular prayer services and services for children.

43. There were some congregations who would only use the Book of Common Prayer and whilst this approach was not dominant among the multi-church groups studied, the clergy interviewed indicated that it prevented any form of change or innovation in those churches. Most multi-church groups benefited from a diversity of styles and approaches to worship but in some the only services were Eucharistic and so always required a priest to lead them. This led to significant difficulty in sourcing a sufficient number of priests to fulfil this commitment. There was also significant reluctance in some churches and multi-

church groups to have any form of non-Eucharistic worship.

44. Of the clergy interviewed the minimum number of services that they would take on a Sunday would be two, with three or four being quite normal for many. One person commented that it was:

*"… rather tiring with all that travelling."*

45. In extremis five or six different services may be taken by one priest on a single Sunday, particularly if a baptism was a separate service or there was a special event taking place.

46. In summary, maintaining regular Sunday worship was the priority in all the multi-church groups studied. Most services were still led by clergy, with Readers and retired clergy where they were present, playing an essential role in sustaining existing patterns of worship. Lay led worship was becoming more frequent and had been a positive development in many of the groups but was not always welcomed by congregations. Many of the groups studied benefited from a diversity of styles and approaches to worship.

# Mission: evangelism, fresh expressions and growth

*"… with the reduced resource we've got it's encouraging people to pool resources and work together so we can try to be more effective."*

47. In the 35 multi-church groups studied missional activity of service and outreach centred around:
   - work with schools, children and young people including Messy Church

- groups and activities for older people
- activities, groups and events targeted at specific groups
- enquirers courses such as Alpha or Emmaus
- confirmation groups, Bible study
- befriending groups, street pastors, good neighbours schemes
- coffee mornings, creams teas, community lunches and other meals
- socialising and / or fundraising
- craft, cultural or heritage events
- music, concerts or plays.

48. There were also some innovative outreach initiatives taking place such as events and groups in the pub, an open mike night for young people and meals aimed at men or young Mums. Some multi-church groups had run some form of enquirers' course in recent years or were doing so currently.



49. There were several distinct approaches to evangelism used in the multi-church groups: special services and occasional offices, events based outreach, seekers courses, work with schools and pupil's families and the development of personal relationships through word and action.

50. Both clergy and lay people were deeply involved with local schools (whether a church school or not) including serving on one or more governing bodies, which could be very time consuming although also very rewarding. Wider work with schools included taking assemblies, running after school clubs and developing relationships with staff and pupils. Several respondents emphasised the value of this work and saw it as an essential part of their wider mission.

*"We have seven primary schools in the benefice, four of which are church schools. Relationships with them are very good. Certainly what we as clergy do in terms of mission amongst children, is what we can do in schools: assemblies and teaching and so on; part of that flows out into the after school club and groups."*

51. Many of the interviewees reported that working with schools (whether a church school or not) gave an opportunity to include pupils and their families in church services and other church events such as Messy Church and seasonal services.

*"The benefice offers a weekly Toddler Play and Praise – this is a lively time of play, with a story, activity and prayer. For primary aged children, there is a monthly Sunday Club and a warm welcome at 'Family Services' held monthly in most of the larger parishes. The churches enjoy good relationships with both schools in the benefice, and are involved in assemblies, and pastoral care. A Deanery Youth Group was established by this benefice and meets monthly during term time. The group now consists of about 10-12 young people aged 12 – 15 and currently run by the existing curate and another lady."*

52. There were several examples of good ecumenical provision for children, usually based in a local market town or large village. In at least one instance, the parish church encouraged its older children to attend the thriving youth club run by the village chapel, rather than try to set something up in competition.

53. There was a realisation that every church in each of the multi-church groups could not provide for children or young people either regularly or occasionally. This was due to both a lack of children in some communities and a lack of volunteers to lead. In some cases families and young people were encouraged to travel to churches either within or outside the group to access appropriate worship and teaching. Holiday clubs or workshops as well as Messy Church events were the main form of outreach to children for many multi-church groups. These two approaches were particularly helpful where there were either small numbers of volunteers or small numbers of children in the parish or multi-church group.

54. Sadly it was not uncommon for respondents to say that there were no children involved in any of the churches in the grouping.

55. In other places the only link with children was through the local schools, with active involvement in assemblies and lessons (usually by the priest). Where relationships were difficult with the schools for various reasons, there was often very few if any children involved in the church in any way.

56. Ecumenical working however gave the opportunity to develop new initiatives that would not be possible for a single denomination. These included Messy Church in a large village, Open the Book and Alpha in two large groups of villages, an evangelism group also in a large village and special events for Christian Aid week in a small market town. It also gave the opportunity to share skills and resources, for example in training lay worship leaders. In some groups of churches ecumenical working was particularly successful, with monthly shared services, monthly meetings and a regular prayer breakfast. This was particularly important in the more remote rural areas.

57. In some places it was felt to be too difficult to work ecumenically, particularly where clergy felt stretched in large church groupings: "so extra effort for ecumenical things can be at a bit of a premium". This was also given as a reason why some groupings did not engage with deanery or diocesan events and initiatives.

58. There was a ready desire to develop fresh expressions and make use of existing ideas or services to adapt them to reach out more effectively to a wider group of people. Several multi-church groups that did not have existing fresh expressions had identified it as something they wanted to take forward. One of the more frequent fresh expressions was groups for men

that offered something very different from regular church services. Others were café church, weekday worship and discussion groups. Fresh expressions had also been developed for example through needing to create a continuing relationship with those who had attended seekers courses. It was evident that there was some confusion around the definition of fresh expressions in rural churches, and some resistance to using the term at all. It is important to note that most fresh expressions encountered in this study were operating on an individual parish basis but unless a strong group identity had been formed, new initiatives were harder to maintain on a group basis.

59. There was a marked contrast between the activities in those churches in less accessible, sparsely populated areas and those in more populated easily accessible areas. Activities such as prayer groups, Bible study or home groups were more likely to meet monthly, if at all in sparsely populated areas, as there were so few

people to draw from. Regular children's work was less frequent in these areas, with only a very small number of children attending church regularly, reflecting the small numbers who lived locally. A few of these multi-church groups had attempted quarterly workshops for children on a Saturday but found it difficult to attract the critical mass of children to make it work effectively or to recruit and retain leaders.

60. In only a small number of parishes was there very little happening that could be identified as outreach or mission, beyond regular Sunday worship.

61. Local knowledge, relationships, networks and identity were all stated as important to facilitate mission at the most local level. Almost all respondents reported a need to keep a careful balance between focusing on individual parishes and the needs of other parishes and the group as a whole. Mission could only be done with the support, commitment and active involvement of lay people. This was not only because the priest could not do it all, but that in all rural communities it was the personal contact of relationships and networks that were the foundation for outreach, social action and evangelism.

62. Some respondents considered that the most important approach to mission was to target

particular activities and events to specific village communities, responding to a specific opportunity or need. For most, there was a correct place for mission activities and events to take place:

*"the mission opportunities of day to day living and the major Christian festivals are celebrated in each village but other things are best done at benefice level."*

63. Frequently work with children and young people, seekers courses and large scale mission events were offered only across the whole multi-church group, not only to allow the smallest settlements and churches to access them but also to create a critical mass both of volunteers and participants. This required co-operation between the different congregations across the group and the exercising of local responsibility and ownership on a parish basis. Many of the clergy interviewed reflected that for some congregation members their primary allegiance remained to the village and its church but they recognised the need to work on a larger scale on some occasions.

64. Serious tensions could arise for the clergy and lay leaders who had to operate on both a parish and group basis and often felt that they were pulled in two different directions. Both felt that they were pressured to make the different churches work together in order to create a critical mass for activities, courses and events but that they needed to operate on a parish basis, as the most effective level for building relationships and providing regular worship. The reluctance of parishes to work at a larger scale of benefice or team was one the main sticking points to creating a cohesive whole from a diverse starting point, which often led to multiplication or missed opportunities.

65. Particularly where a multi-church group covered a large geographical area or had

difficult transport links, mission activity was focused on individual parishes, as the group and / or deanery were too large. In these circumstances the added complexity of:

*"establishing a bigger community on top was not perceived to be beneficial."*

66. Several clergy commented that there was a larger number of lay ministers and resources (personnel, skills and finance) available across the multi-church group as a whole than would be possible from the individual churches themselves. Here, churches with small congregations benefited from being part of a larger group in order to retain regular Sunday worship and be part of group wide mission activities and events. Conversely, in the largest geographical groups not everyone found it easy to understand that what went on in the whole group was open to them too. This was particularly difficult where there was scattered housing and isolated farms.

67. Although none of the respondents spoke about it explicitly, it was clear that for many clergy the role that they could have was limited to: sustaining regular Sunday worship, providing occasional offices, carrying out administrative tasks, attending PCCs and other meetings and applying for faculties for building work. For many there was limited, if any time left for outreach, mission or evangelism.

*"Basically it [mission] has suffered because of lack of staff, I was running around like a headless chicken! … That's just not easy with eight churches scattered over [a large area].*

68. In summary mission in rural churches was taking place in almost all the multi-church groups studied. Many of the initiatives had led to new life and growth. However mission was limited by:

- a lack of personnel both ordained and lay, stipendiary or volunteer
- a focus on retaining (traditional) Sunday worship as the only means of expression of a worshiping community
- a lack of trust between different churches in a multi-church group which in some cases meant that they all pulled in different directions
- limited resources (skills, financial, time)
- the difficulty in creating a critical mass to run or attend an activity or event.



69. Growth can be defined in many different ways but for these purposes a three-fold interpretation has been used:

- growth in service and outreach
- deepening of discipleship
- increase in numbers attending regular Sunday or mid-week worship or a fresh expression.

70. There was evidence of growth in all three areas from the interview transcripts although a deepening of discipleship was rarely mentioned as taking place.

71. Inevitably there was a great deal of concern particularly amongst the clergy interviewed about the current and future size of congregations and their ability to take the steps needed to share faith with others in the community.

*"The only thing I haven't said to you is I also see my leadership role as making sure we start new things which grow alongside the old. I'm quite certain that the old is too old to be a suitable vessel to hold the new Christians of the 21st Century."*

72. There was a frequent lament that some (not all) congregations were stuck in a rut and were not open to new ideas or approaches but were desperate for people to come to church to ensure that the building remained open and the familiar worship continued. In a few of those situations it had been possible to develop a new congregation or fresh expression alongside the existing church, which took significant additional time and resources for clergy and lay people alike. In other situations new Christians or young families wanting to explore church



after a baptism were often referred to another church either within or outside of the multi-church group that had more accessible worship or good arrangements for children.

*"…my sense is that the church will contract as it grows. We're seeing new people in church and doing church related things so the age profile is coming down … but the numbers will go down as we're growing as the age profile at the moment is so heavily weighted in favour of older people. …our numbers have stayed the same overall but I'm basically replacing the dead people with new people who are much younger but in … the future when all the oldest people have died, there won't be enough 40-50 years old to take their places."*

73. As with other creative work for all age groups, fresh expressions and work with schools, whilst helping people to explore and come to faith, very few of these activities resulted in more people attending traditional Sunday worship. Although overall attendance was therefore increasing, it was not necessarily being acknowledged or understood as growth by some congregations.

# Clergy roles and responsibilities

74. Although the roles and responsibilities of a priest working in a multi-church grouping are essentially the same as for a priest working in a single church, many of the activities, groups and relationships were multiplied many times. With several churches, congregations, communities, PCCs, churchwardens, buildings, schools, other organisations and groups, there is considerable complexity and a great deal of time was spent on developing and sustaining these working relationships.

75. Most clergy in this study worked as part of a clergy or clergy and lay team, or were supported by Readers, House for Duty, self-supporting or retired priests. Only in a few instances was a priest working completely on their own. It was frequently reported that both self-supporting and House for Duty priests worked significantly more than the agreed number of hours each week and some multi-church groups, worship and occasional offices were only maintained by the generosity of retired priests.

76. The most frequent approach to allocating pastoral responsibilities was to have specific churches identified with specific clergy but a few groups had developed group-wide responsibility for members of their ministry team, both lay and ordained.

77. For the clergy interviewed many said that congregations, members of lay teams and the wider community had expectations of them that they felt they should be fulfilling as the priest in those communities. One of the recurring themes was that the priest was still viewed as the 'face' of the church with many mentioning the added stress that this put upon them to be everywhere at once and be seen to do all the things that a church should be doing. An alternative approach of training and empowering lay people to carry out pastoral visiting resulted in a comment from a clergy person:

*"We have a lot of lay people… who do a lot of visiting and I still get the comment that 'we haven't seen you… come and visit us'."*

78. This puts pressure onto the clergy to try to fulfil these expectations of presence, participation and pastoral care. However, for many it was important to help the congregation to realise that they were the primary agents of pastoral care for each other and could often do this more effectively than the priest.

79. The model of pastoral care still prevalent in many rural communities is that of the 'vicar' being available and able to visit all who live there, especially during illness, even if they do not attend church. This can be at odds with a gathered (more suburban) model of the priest primarily visiting the congregation only. In rural contexts this model is unhelpful as the distinction between community and congregation life is so blurred. Through the parochial system everyone is brought into the church's arena, so that pastoral care offered by the church is a practical demonstration of God's care and concern in every aspect of life, including the spiritual. This predominant model is a deeply engrained part of the rural church and can lead to unrealistic expectations placed on the priest ("only the priest will do") and on lay pastoral assistants, especially when applied to multiple communities. One priest had worked to help the congregations understand that they were the church in that place – not the priest.



The congregation are primary agents of pastoral care

80. There was also a very limited amount of time for the priest to be present and visible within the different rural communities.

Pastoral visits needed to happen differently and an incarnational approach to ministry became essential within rural communities, as one priest explained.

*"… you are the church not just in the activities but in the day to day. Just going to the village shop you can do several pastoral visits on the way. You have these conversations if you're sat in the doctor's waiting room or in the post office or at the school gates. There are numerous opportunities at coffee mornings. The pastoral work goes on constantly in all these different places"*

81. Many clergy respondents commented on the tension between the parish where they were resident and the other churches in the multi-church group. More positively all of the lay interviewees recognised that the priest could not do or attend everything within the multi-church group and that therefore their time would need to be shared with other churches and communities. Most of the lay respondents also recognised and welcomed the need to involve lay people more widely in the life and work of the church, not just in worship and pastoral care but also in mission and outreach too.

# Leadership

82. Effective leadership was very important for all the multi-church groups in this study. In all situations the position of leader was taken by an ordained priest, whether full time, part time, stipendiary or self-supporting.

83. The predominant approach to structuring the multi-church group was for the churches to be organised around one or more priests, rather than as a number of churches present in different communities for the benefit of the people in those places, served by one or more priests. Consequently and implicitly leadership was centred around the priest.

84. The clergy interviewed operated a broad range of leadership styles, presenting a spectrum of approaches. These included: strong, directional leadership; strategic or visionary; acting as a catalyst; seeking to involve others; enabling and encouraging; oversight or episcopal in style.

85. Clergy often moved in and out of different leadership styles depending on the situation and the objective, with the aim to be strategic in use of their time and resources. Most tried hard to work with lay people in a variety of inclusive and enabling ways. However some felt that a number of individual churches and multi-church groups as a whole, still wanted the vicar to make the decisions, as they were not of a tradition where lay people had been expected or encouraged to take responsibility.

86. Leadership in small congregations required an understanding that change would be slow and would need to be agreed and negotiated. Working with the people in church and community rather than imposing their own will was felt to be essential by the clergy interviewed. Others spoke of needing to accept and work with

the skills and abilities that were present already, rather than wishing for what was desirable. Using the insight and knowledge of lay people who knew the local culture and history made new initiatives more appropriate to the local communities.

*"I think good leadership is able to both be deeply engaged in the place and also sufficiently detached from it to be able to analyse what's going on there and read its possibilities … a clarifying and actualizing role rather than the imposition of one person's vision on the community."*

87. Developing a team approach either across the multi-church group or within individual churches enabled others to be trained and developed to take a more active part in the life of the church. In this way responsibility was more easily shared and more people encouraged to take part. However, not everyone found this an easy process or had the training or experience for what was felt to be different form of ministry, operating very differently from being the incumbent of a single church.

88. The limited sharing of leadership, power or authority between lay and ordained, no matter what the underlying structure of the multi-church group, reflected some of the difficulties and complexities of multi-church ministry. This seemed to be because:

- there was an absence of people with whom responsibility could be shared either through a lack of confidence or training, or a reluctance to try a new approach;

- a reluctance by one or more churches in the group to operate in a more collegial way;

- shared or collaborative leadership was not generally understood beyond training lay worship leaders;

- collusion between congregations and

priest that retained leadership, vision and direction with the incumbent and released the PCCs and others from having to consider these questions;

- the desire by some clergy to be in charge and lead in a dominant style.

89. Particularly in situations where the different churches were reluctant to work together or the group as a whole was resistant to new developments, clergy and lay alike spoke of their frustration at the situation. Clergy had to communicate the wider vision to all the congregations as well as offer assurance to bring a multi-church group together as a whole. This again emphasised the problems that arose when:

- the incumbent was the only common factor between the churches in a multi-church group;

- there had been little if any preparatory work done with multi-church groups when they were brought together;

- the expectations of what clergy can do and achieve exceed what is possible;

- congregations and PCCs were not empowered to take ownership of their own collective life through worship, mission and outreach.

*As one interviewee commented:*
*"The dream ticket would be if you had active, committed, mature Christians in each place who had the time and energy to share the leadership with me. We don't have anywhere near enough of those people. I am trying to train them and have just run a lay worship leaders' course, but if I'm doing training, something else has to go."*

90. This response is not only a reflection on the often very small numbers that a rural church has to draw from, in both community and church, but also the prevalence of a more traditional approach to the life of the institutional church. With the exception of Readers, lay leadership had not been the

norm for some of the groupings and to a certain extent the perception can still be that clergy will be able to fulfil all of the roles within a multi-church group that they would be expected to do in one church. This quote also illustrates one of the tensions of multi-church ministry between sustaining current patterns of worship, developing leadership from amongst the small but nonetheless vital (in both senses of the word) skilled and committed Christians present and the need to reach out to the wider community through mission and ministry. The external and internal pressure to do all these things (and others) can often be overwhelming and lead to a focus on only maintaining regular Sunday worship and thereby creating a high level of stress amongst ordained and lay alike.

91. The clergy in this study regularly reflected that they had received very little if any training relevant to ministry and mission in rural multi-church groups. They also demonstrated a spectrum of attitudes in relation to understanding the role of priest in a multi-church group, especially in relation to their own leadership, training and personal and corporate expectations:

- vocation – this is / is not what I was called to do

- expectation – this is / is not what I was trained to do

- training – I have been called to do this but not been trained.

# The ministry of lay people

92. The ministry of lay people was essential to the functioning of rural parish churches. Lay people were deeply involved in all aspects of church life including: pastoral care, visiting (formal and informal), working with children and young people, home Communion, administration, finance, fundraising, leading study groups, community lunches, social events, outreach, contributing to and leading worship, and looking after the building.

93. The importance of churchwardens is considerable and crucial. Not only did they take responsibility for the building and many of the legal requirements but were often acting as the priest's eyes and ears, particularly when they were not resident in that community. Some churchwardens also had a ministry of oversight in their own parish, supporting the wider ministry of lay and ordained alike. In other places relationships were less supportive and churchwardens (as others) were capable of acting as destructive gatekeepers preventing any form of change or new ideas being introduced.

The ministry of lay people is essential for the future of the rural church



94. Regular Sunday worship in many multi-church groups was sustained by the ministry of lay people. Lay people were involved in all aspects of leading worship. In almost all the groups of churches studied, there had been an increase in the numbers of services led by lay people over the past ten years. Most of the groups studied were trying to recruit and train more people to lead worship. In other places there was a lot

of reluctance from congregation members to be involved in liturgical activities.

95.   Several interviewed emphasised the importance of locally available training for lay people, especially in leading worship and pastoral care, that was accessible and relevant. Where there was good practice in encouraging, enabling and leading a team of lay and ordained, there were regular team meetings, feedback and prayer. The style of leadership by the priest in this context then became very important as collaboration with lay people was essential to developing a sustainable approach to providing worship.

*As one priest commented: "the role of the priest is to support the ministry of the church not to do it."*

96.   There were several examples of formal ministry teams of varying types and composition being used across the multi-church groups studied. The vast majority included one or more lay people, in addition to a Reader, a few were entirely composed of clergy, others were a team of lay people led by a priest. Lay ministry teams either covered the whole multi-church group, two or more churches within the group or individual parishes only.

97.   The teams had a variety of names and roles ranging from operating as a think tank, to being responsible for pastoral care and / or provision of worship. Some teams also took responsibility for mission and outreach but these were few in number as the focus for most was retaining regular Sunday worship and associated pastoral care.

98.   It was also widely felt that the very smallest congregations did not easily lend themselves to a formalised lay team approach. In this situation informal structures were used, often led by a

churchwarden or the small church was simply rolled into a larger team structure.

99.   It was recognised by many respondents that the larger and more complex the multi-church group got, the greater the need for trained, skilled and effective lay ministry and that a key role for the clergy was to encourage and develop the vocation of lay people to a wide range of roles and activities. It was acknowledged by some clergy that a balance needed to be struck between maintaining worship and other activities through the active participation and leadership of lay people and in allowing those lay people time to develop their own discipleship and explore their own vocation further, particularly in relation to their involvement in wider community life.

# Governance

100.  The most common form of governance structure in the multi-church groups studied was the Parochial Church Council (PCC). No matter the size of the multi-church group, parishes tended to retain decision making, responsibility and power. Many clergy, whether of incumbent status or not, attended multiple PCC meetings often on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. Some PCCs met on a quarterly basis. The desire to retain individual parish governance was also prevalent even where there were other facilitating structures in place, such as working groups, churchwardens' meetings or a Benefice or Team Council. This further multiplied the number of meetings and it was not just clergy who were tired and frustrated by meetings, busy lay people had limited time or energy for meetings too.

101.  Two of the groups in this study operated a formal united parish structure where there was a single PCC for all the churches in the group. This allowed for the creation of a core group that could engage in vision,

planning and programming on behalf of all the churches. It also enabled issues around fabric and fundraising to be dealt with by local committees for each church building.

102. Within multi-church groups where multiple governance structures were retained there were shining examples of good practice, particularly in terms of focusing on the key aspects of mission and worship. In one such example a questionnaire was used to ask congregation members what they wanted and what their aspirations were for the multi-church group. Five key areas were identified and a working group set up for each:
- children and young people
- growth and learning
- pastoral care and service to the community
- resources (and administration)
- worship.



103. Each working group had a representative from every PCC. This meant that events and initiatives were developed and owned across the whole group. The working groups also drove mission, setting priorities and making sure things were done.

The incumbent was a member of each working group but did not chair them, also delegating the chairing of the PCCs to the lay vice-chair.

104. In some multi-church groups the only unifying factor was the clergy, with each parish continuing to function autonomously to retain an independent existence. For a small number of other groups the arrangements were simply a "marriage of convenience" to retain ordained ministry or in order to pay enough parish share. There was no sense of genuine solidarity or desire to make the group operate in a meaningful way. This was particularly problematic where there had been a priest in each of the parishes within living memory or there had been repeated pastoral reorganisation with the number of churches in the group gradually increasing.

105. Many respondents commented that PCC meetings were often entirely focused on fabric and finance issues with little time left to focus on outreach or mission. One approach was to create a separate body, for example a benefice council or think tank to be more creative, to:

*"think exciting thoughts, and because it has no legal existence it is free from any paperwork or agenda other than that which it sets itself".*

106. One of the subsequent problems was that each PCC then had to discuss and approve a proposal coming from such a body which could delay significantly, up to six months in some cases, the implementation of an idea.

107. The creation of a benefice or group council offered the opportunity to bring the different churches together to assist with decision making around a broad range of common issues. Almost all benefice or group councils did not have any legal standing so whilst they went some way towards

simplifying decision making processes, most decisions needed to be ratified by individual PCCs. Members were either nominated, appointed, churchwardens or volunteered.

All multi-church groups would benefit from an intentional focus on mission

108. The requirement to ratify proposals or decisions taken by group structures, by each PCC, often led to long delays in progressing even simple matters, and to frustration for all concerned. Even where decision making powers were delegated to parish representatives (rarely) contentious matters were still referred back to PCCs. Even where the benefice council had legal standing (in one case) its decisions still required ratification by the individual PCCs under the system in place. One frustrated respondent commented that the benefice council had taken over one year just to get a benefice bank account set up. The benefice council or similar structure was most frequently used to agree the rota of services and to facilitate the payment of common expenses. On a more positive note they were also felt to be beneficial as it brought the churches together in one meeting place, enabled resources to be identified and pooled and communication improved. Other multi-church groups used a joint churchwardens' meeting to agree service rotas, joint working and other initiatives.

# Structures

109. Another difficulty was when a team or group ministry had been formed but was not supported by any form of legal constitution, making structures too numerous, clumsy and without a single governing or decision making body. Clergy were left to improvise arrangements:

*"making it up as we go along".*

110. It was not uncommon to find that PCCs were formally meeting less than the legal minimum required in one year. Clergy also frequently found significant duplication between PCC and DCC and for some trying to add a more coherent approach to decision making at the benefice or group level was resisted by church members already overburdened with meetings.

111. There was very little strategic thinking applied to pastoral reorganisation and despite good intentions to the contrary, most multi-church groups were churches and parishes organised around the priest (stipendiary or not) without any broader focus or intention.

112. A desire to move to a united parish or similar structure was frequently expressed by the clergy interviewed to simplify and shorten decision making and reduce the number of meetings they attended. The

114. When a single legal governing body had been created for all the churches in the group, the individual churches were released from having to find officeholders, particularly treasurers and churchwardens, but were able to retain small local committees to look after the building. There was a great sense of relief at this administrative and structural burden being lifted. As one priest commented:

*"there is nothing in [the Church Representational Rules] for clergy if there aren't churchwardens. It's almost like it's been inconceivable to think that there wouldn't be churchwardens."*

115. Another approach was for all PCCs to meet together in one place at the same time. Whilst finding a suitable building may be difficult it had proved to be a useful approach to prevent a priest attending multiple PCC meetings to discuss the same issues.

When burdens of administration and governance are lifted there is a great release



116. One interviewee spoke of the value of having a benefice or group administrator. This had been an opportunity to try to centralise communications and to lift some of the day to day administration off the shoulders of churchwardens. The administrator was also responsible for preparing agendas and taking minutes of the group meetings. Other administrators worked only a few hours each week, but all who had the benefit of an administrator commented favourably on the contribution they made to the functioning of the group. This was particularly valuable when arranging funerals and managing other diary commitments.

approach of retaining decision making on buildings, social events and some elements of finance by individual parishes was seen to be important but it was clear that many churches were reluctant to transfer any aspect of power and authority away from the parish.

113. Several interviewees commented on the struggle to recruit office holders, especially but not exclusively churchwardens. Several churches reported having only one warden and others that if all possible places on a PCC were filled, they could out-number the regular worshiping congregation.

*"…the population of the entire Benefice is 5,500. So out of 5,500 to find 26 churchwardens, 13 treasurers etc. and then [fill 13] church councils is a big ask. The whole structure of… bureaucracy is a huge burden that these parishes carry".*

# Church buildings

*"…no more than 2,000 people and we're maintaining six Grade 1 churches"*

117. The buildings in the groupings in this study were used in one of three ways:

    • only for worship on a Sunday, either once or twice a month, or every week

    • for Sunday services, mid-week services and church related activities or meetings

    • by the community for a wide range of groups and events, in addition to church activities and Sunday services.



When toilets and a kitchen are in a church the building is used much more frequently

118. There was variation between the churches in the study as to whether the building was open during the day or not. Where they were open the buildings both acted as an attraction for visitors and a place for quiet prayer. This is an important and usually hidden contribution to community life, sharing faith and offering hospitality and welcome.

119. Community groups made extensive use of the church buildings in some of the groups studied. Where a church hall was present this was also well used by wider community organisations. Where a church had installed a toilet and especially a kitchen facility, the building was used in a much more extensive way by both congregation and community.

120. Roughly half of the churches in this study had particularly low use by community groups, which was attributed to the lack of basic facilities such as a toilet, kitchen or warm meeting space, and in a couple of cases the absence of running water. This greatly limited the potential usefulness of the church building and meant that for one third of those interviewed, they also made use of the village hall for special services, events and meetings, often preferentially.

121. Where a village hall was present this also limited the potential use of the church by other organisations, even where it did have facilities, as most used the village hall for preference. In some of the rural areas there was a reluctance to convert a church building for multi-purpose use to avoid competing with an existing village hall, to ensure that it remained financially viable.

122. Participants in this study listed the following major issues with looking after church buildings:

- expensive and difficult to maintain
- difficult and expensive to heat
- inflexible furniture
- absence of running water, toilets, and kitchen facilities
- limited number of volunteers prepared or able to help keep a building clean and in good condition
- lack of skilled individuals able to deal with the complexities of an ancient church building
- time consuming for lay and clergy alike especially in relation to the faculty process, applications for grants and fundraising
- a focus for the congregation on sustaining the building squeezing out mission.

123. It is clear from all the interviews that congregations and communities wanted to keep their churches open. The presence of a sacred space was seen to be important within the settlement but this desire did not necessarily translate into any actions that would keep the buildings open. This included a reluctance to make any changes, develop new initiatives, encourage more people to join the congregation or to make the building more useful or financially sustainable.

124. In many cases a church remained open only because of almost continuous fundraising to pay the parish share, quota or common fund to the diocese, and to cover the running costs of the building. Even with strategies for regular giving, fundraising remained a necessity. This approach relies upon the surrounding community being prepared to support the church and is not a long term strategy for financial sustainability. Whilst the de-churched may be happy to contribute as the church still means something to them, the un-churched may be less interested in contributing now, as well as in 15-20 years' time. It also placed a heavy burden on a small number of people to run a wide range and large number of social events to raise the money. The emphasis on fundraising also acted as a distraction from wider mission activities.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

This research shows that meaningful mission and growth are possible in rural multi-church groups, where time and space is created for it to take place and where the ministry of lay people is enabled and equipped. Strategies for mission and ministry in rural multi-church groups, devised locally, or by deaneries or dioceses should therefore:

- include an intentional focus on mission and evangelism
- free up the time and energy of lay people and clergy to focus on mission and ministry
- envision, nurture and equip the ministry of lay people.

## Recommendation 2

High quality, specific and locally accessible training and development should be provided through dioceses for clergy and lay people in multi-church groups to support discipleship, mission, the ministry of lay people, work with schools, children and young people, worship and leadership.

## Recommendation 3

It is important to build a culture of discipleship within rural congregations. Relevant resources and distinctive models to encourage discipleship need to be collated and promoted to assist in building the foundations for mission in rural communities.

## Recommendation 4

The burden of administration, financial management and legal requirements is generally too heavy for clergy and lay people alike, taking up a considerable amount of time and energy. A thorough review of legal governance structures and the requirement for many officeholders within a multi-church group needs to be overseen by the Archbishops' Council and carried out urgently. This should aim to simplify structures and processes, make recommendations on efficient governance mechanisms and reduce the number of officeholders and formal meetings required.

## Recommendation 5

Multi-church groups should be encouraged to improve systems for managing administration to reduce the burden placed on both clergy and lay people. The provision of this resource could be approached in a number of ways such as: a part time post, an appointment shared across a number of benefices, a full time post for one or more deaneries. The resource could address administration, financial accounting, building and churchyard management. This should be seen as an enabling resource which releases time and energy amongst clergy and lay people and should therefore be a legitimate call on mission funding.

## Recommendation 6

Addressing isolation and promoting collegiality is essential to enhancing the effectiveness of mission and ministry in rural multi-church groups. During formation, clergy should be supported to develop the habits and values of collegiality. Additionally within IME Phases 1 and 2 and as part of CMD, clergy should receive specific training to work in rural multi-church groups, to develop an enabling and equipping style of leadership that seeks to grow and facilitate the ministry of lay people.

## Recommendation 7

Multi-church groups should be supported by dioceses to develop cooperative working between the different churches, with other multi-church groups and ecumenically, where possible. Many rural multi-church groups would also benefit from a process to find a collective identity, operate collegially, share resources and expertise, improve communications and develop intentional mission and evangelism.

## Recommendation 8

Church buildings can be both a blessing and a burden, which falls primarily on the congregation and clergy. Urgent attention needs to be given to a strategy for their future management, as well as continuing the work to sustain buildings through extended community use.

## Recommendation 9

Further qualitative research is needed to assess the most effective methods of enabling mission in rural communities within multi-church groups, including fresh expressions and work with schools.

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND