

## Rural churches can grow

### ***Bishop Donald's address at the Christian Resources Exhibition, Peterborough, 26 February 2011***

#### **Summary:**

- Village life is different from town life and must be approached differently.
- Clergy need to be “embedded” or “incarnate” in rural communities, knowing the people personally and being present at major village events
- Willing lay people should be allowed to do things including leading services of the Word
- Too many Eucharists can be off-putting for the large “fringe” membership in villages; clergy should be seen at non-Sacramental services regularly
- Village churches are great opportunities for mission. They can grow but we need to recover a confidence in the gospel.

#### **Introduction – myths about villages**

Many people have said to me “can the church grow in the countryside?” It’s a fascinating question.

I recently asked this question of someone who had been an effective vicar of rural churches and who had seen some growth. The answer was, “It’s quite straightforward, just make sure the clergy keep out of the way!”

The difficulty about growing the church in the countryside is normally the relationship or the non-relationship between the clergy and the people. When a priest, minister, vicar, arrives in the countryside to do rural ministry, if that person knows the feel and rhythms and the life of villages, nine times out of ten the churches will grow. But if that person feels that villages are odd places, that life in villages is unreal, or that villages are strange bubbles completely separated from the rest of the world, then the churches probably won’t grow.

Of course, when the minister and the people together have a vision for growth and work on it together, growth is pretty nearly guaranteed, as far as you can guarantee things in the Kingdom – it’s always God in charge, not us. But when the vicar and the people see things differently and when the vicar has no sympathy for rural life, it’s going to be a recipe for trouble. And when the vicar isn’t able to use the lay people in the way that rural lay people can be used, there’s going to trouble.

Someone else I talked to who is not in village ministry but a Christian leader on the national stage, asked what I was speaking about today. When I told him he said “Oh, villages are strange places, villages are just like little bubbles, completely cut off from everything else”.

I tried to say to him that it’s the cosmopolitan world which he inhabits that’s a strange place. There’s nothing strange about villages, it’s how life used to be for everyone. It’s towns that are the modern invention and the modern intrusion, where you don’t know

where the boundary is between one parish and the next and you don't know where your great grandfather is buried.

### **A different culture**

Of course, most people in our country live in the cities and the suburbs. They're the reality that most folk know. Village life, whether you are a long term child of the village or whether you are an incomer, is different from cosmopolitan or suburban or city life. And by and large it is the bigger churches that produce clergy, those training for ministry, and by and large the bigger churches aren't in the villages. So people who are going into rural ministry are going into very cross cultural ministry and they are not always adequately trained or prepared for that. Even when they are trained they haven't always got the right sympathy and ability to be part of the village and be genuinely part of the life of a village community. It is a different way of being.

When people have been in rural parts of Africa for any length of time they are deeply touched and moved by the sense of community, and by the fact that rhythms of life are different from those in towns and cities. Because they are going abroad they know that the experience is going to be different, they know that the culture is going to be different and they don't complain about African village life, because they know they are going to Africa.

But it is still the case, I am afraid, that when a lot of clergy think about village ministry either they don't want to go there or if they do go there they are not actually prepared to make the real journey of crossing a culture, and thinking and behaving and doing and being differently from the way they are in towns. It is a very significant and difficult area. A lot of it is perceptions, isn't it?

In my previous job [as Archdeacon of Chester] I spent eight years living in a village and having responsibility for the rural clergy of the diocese, and trying to help many people do that transition into thinking rurally. One of the aspects of rural life that's different from town life is a slightly slower pace of life, and certainly a slower pace of change being acceptable to many people.

There's also a huge sense of community on a fairly small scale and a huge sense of the importance of place, the importance of buildings, the church buildings, the pub, the school, the post office and so on. Those places are much more important than they are in towns; and the fact that in our country there is next to no public transport to or from villages means that the communities are going to be isolated and it will feel different. But they are not isolated by and large in terms of being desperately lonely places.

### **Clergy "embedded" in the community**

Village ministry is like old fashioned church ministry, they want a parson who is visible, who cares for them, who knows their names, who walks around the village, who knocks on doors, who says hello to people and spends time with them, passes the time of day.

One rural vicar I knew didn't visit the people in their homes. He felt in his previous town ministry that it had never really worked, because no-one was ever in and if they were in they were watching the telly. But if he'd tried visiting the people in the villages in their homes they'd have welcomed him. They would have been more likely to be in during the

day and during the evening they would gladly have turned the television off and put the kettle on the minute he got there.

Someone said to me “I couldn’t be a village vicar, I’d just have to stand with my foot on the bar of a gate and piece of straw in my mouth chatting to farmers.” Clearly that was someone else not suitable for village ministry! But what’s wrong with standing at the farm gate chatting to the farmer? You don’t get many opportunities for a leisurely conversation with your parishioners in town ministry, but in villages you do.

What it boils down to is for clergy to be less interested in systems and processes and rotas, and more interested in people. And more interested in finding out about people, finding out their family history, and actually getting to know them and care for them and show that you care for them.

And being at the things that are important to them, like the village fete, even though it’s not a “Gospel opportunity” and even though you may disapprove of tombolas or whatever – just being there because it’s an important event for the village and is part of their life. Most towns don’t have events that are important for the town’s life in the same way. For example, Peterborough has all sorts of events going on in the centre – concerts, meetings, special markets and something on every weekend and often on weekdays. But none of those things is an essential event, no one event matters that much for the life of the city. It is the fact that there are so many of them, with such variety, that keeps the city alive.

But in a village the church fayre, the village fayre, the May Day celebrations, the Harvest celebrations – these are so important to the life of the village, that if the vicar thinks that he or she has got something better to do elsewhere they’re blowing the whole opportunity of Christian ministry in that place. Because the village events are central, they are what the village is about, they’re what makes the village.

If there’s a village pub or school, whether it’s a church school or not, or a village shop or post office, the vicar needs to be in those places regularly, passing the time of day with people, chatting, being seen, being part of the village life, being part of the community. A lot of people in villages are suspicious of the clergy because of the way they change things and do things and don’t do things and often aren’t there. But in villages, unlike in towns, if the clergy are present and at the village events (preferably wearing a collar, but that’s not essential when they’ve been there a few years and are well known), if the villagers feel he/she is “one of us” then the church has a chance to grow.

Someone nobbled me once, a village person who is on the fringes of church, and said, “Thank you so much for arranging our vicar’s retirement!” Now I hadn’t actually done that - he’d just written to me to say he was retiring. But she added that there are dozens of people in the village who will be back at church now. That’s terribly sad, because this man isn’t a bad priest, he’s not a bad man, he knows the Lord and loves the Gospel, but for one reason or another he hasn’t become, in the phrase they use with war zone journalists, “embedded” in the village – incarnate is a theological way of putting it.

Becoming part of a village can be difficult. Even though a town has lots of people, there’s more loneliness and isolation there. It’s quite possible to be on your own in a town, much more so than in a village. The vicar who moves into a village thinking it’s like a town and you don’t need to know your neighbours or to go to the same social events as the other

people in your road, is going to lose it. You do need to go to the social events that belong to the village; you do need to be part of it.

The community might be a bit suspicious, they might be a bit reserved, but they want to welcome people in if those people want to be part of the village and go to what the village thinks is important and have their life in the village. Some incomers to villages, like people who use them as a nice pleasant community base, are resented by villages partly because they push the house prices up, but more because they don't get stuck into the life of the village.

Of course, it can be difficult when a minister or a priest has a number of villages to look after. But if a vicar lives in one village and is fully immersed in the events and life of that village then the people of the neighbouring village whose church he is also looking after, will respect him for his being incarnate in the life of the village he lives in. They hope he'll come to some of their things, they'll understand if he can't come to all of them, but if the vicar uses the fact that he has six villages to look after as an excuse for not getting rooted in any of them, disaster is looming.

### **Let lay people do things**

Of course, you get bottlenecks and problems in church growth anywhere. They're sometimes to do with the clergy, or the laity, but more often to do with the relationship between the clergy and the laity.

The other big area for village and church life is using the laity. I think of one particular church which I knew quite well. Its vicar was looking after a number of parishes, he was in his sixties and beginning to feel a bit tired and was looking forward to retirement. One of his churches had a regular weekly evening service as well as a morning service. The vicar had gone alternate weeks morning and evening, so he'd been there once each Sunday. But he said to them, "I'm getting a bit tired I'm not going to come in the evenings any more, so we'll just have a fortnightly evening service which will be led by the reader from another village. The other week, sorry, I'm too tired to come out in the evenings."

Two of the ladies of that church, both energetic, youngish retired professionals, came to see me [as Archdeacon] and said, "some of us could organise a fortnightly service; we're not licensed, we're not readers, we're not trained, but we could lay on a few hymns and songs, we could do some Bible readings; we're not preachers, but we could do a Bible study instead of a sermon, or get in some tapes of sermons, and lay on some tea and coffee that we don't have in our church anyway. We think we could get 25 or 30 people, if you let us run those services". The usual Evensong congregation was about eight to twelve.

These women came to me full of enthusiasm, and I said "Three cheers! As far as I'm concerned, of course you can, but you do need the vicar's permission." So they went to the vicar and asked his permission and he said no.

Why? Maybe he felt threatened by people more energetic than him of a similar age. Maybe by the thought of a Bible study instead of one of his hope-less sermons. I don't quite know, but what's happened a few years later is that the evening service has shrunk on the two weeks it does run, and there's nothing left.

In village life you find the lay people who are willing to do things and you let them do them their way. You don't try and shape or mould them too much. If they say we'd love to lead a service, we can't do a talk, but could we have a Bible study instead of a sermon, you rejoice and encourage them and help them and give them some books on how to lead Bible studies and do a training session or something like that – but keep it low key and friendly.

The vicar needs to trust the laity to lead things more and more. If you are looking after six churches you can't be in charge of all of them. A sensible vicar will find two or three good people in each village and in effect hand over the day to day running of that church to those people and they'll organise the rotas and services and they will be done well and with integrity and in a way that's right for the village.

The vicar has to step back a little bit and view the whole picture of the villages and area strategically and work out where he or she needs to be involved. If the vicar puts his or her involvement into those points where the church is showing signs of growth, the church will grow. If the vicar's involvement is at those points where the church isn't showing signs of growth the church will not grow, it's as simple as that.

If the vicar allows the lay people to do things well without too much interference or telling them how to do it they are much more likely not only to grow, but to be genuine indigenous village churches.

### **Make services fringe-friendly**

Churches tend to grow in villages, when they don't major on Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, Sacraments. What people in villages like and what helps the churches grow, much more than in towns, is a fairly straightforward service of readings and hymns and prayers and encouragement, some Bible teaching in any format.

A communion service as the main service every week is a no-no. It doesn't usually work in most villages, or else it gathers together a particular sort of committed Christian and it erects huge barriers for the fringe people.

In the typical English village over 90% are fringe members of the church; that's not like a town. In many towns the fringe members are very few; the congregation on Easter Day or Harvest Festival isn't much bigger than it is on a normal Sunday, particularly if it's the normal Eucharist. In a village for Harvest Festival most villagers will be in church, unless the vicar has alienated them, and similarly if other things are laid on, like Plough Sunday and all the other rural village opportunities.

The fringe is huge, and if Communion is the main service most weeks, this could alienate the fringe. We need to think very hard about this. Some of us love the Lord's Table, some of us believe quite firmly theologically that the Lord's people should gather round the Lord's Table on the Lord's day. I have no problem with any of that, but I know that laying that on as the main service in the villages every Sunday won't see the church growing, because the fringe won't have anywhere to go or any way of engaging with it.

The well-meaning, but mistaken way that some village clergy run their churches is this; they organise a rota in such a way that when they appear it's Communion. The clergy

are in effect the mass priests and they go round on a rota to each of the village churches in their care doing a Communion service whenever they get there.

What does that mean? It means that the people who turn up to those services on those Sundays receive the Sacrament as well as the Word and a more full expression of worship and of God's touch and blessing, but also it means that the vicar never meets the fringe of the church, because only the core people, the committed, come to the Communion and in the village the fringe of the church is 90% of the church.

They may get some lay people to help, hopefully to make sure each church does have some kind of service each Sunday, but if the non-Eucharistic service is fortnightly or monthly the church isn't likely to grow. If it's every Sunday it will grow, but rural clergy have to rethink the way they do their ministry so that they are actively involved in the non-Sacramental services as well as the Sacramental.

That may ultimately mean slightly fewer Sacramental services in the villages, so if the vicar is doing three services on Sunday they are not all Communion so he or she can be there for a family service or (a possibly modernised) Evensong. There are big questions for the Church of England over how Communion is provided if the vicar is putting a fair amount of energy into the non-Sacramental services and there are ways of dealing with that which I am very happy to discuss.

Now, of course, the vicar has to be plugged into the community and but he or she doesn't have to be seen at every church service, because villagers don't expect that, they're realistic and they know how many other churches the poor vicar has got to look after. But if the vicar is known to trust the laity and the vicar is there at the services that the visitors come to that's a really good sign and much more likely to achieve what we want.

### **So can village churches grow?**

Yes, of course they can, because God's still on the throne, God's alive, the Gospel is true and powerful. I have asked a number of rural clergy if they believe the church can grow in this diocese and they have said yes. Then I've said "do you believe that your village churches can grow?" and sadly some have replied "I'm not sure".

What's missing is confidence in the Gospel, confidence in the fact that villages are real places with real people, such as the villages where Jesus lived and did most of his ministry. Villages are places of great integrity, and sometimes places of great gossiping and backbiting, but people know each other and know each other's stories ever so well.

Villages are places of great opportunity for ministry and for Gospel growth. In almost all the villages in the parishes I am responsible for a far higher proportion of people go to church than in the towns and certainly for special events such as Easter and Harvest and so on. In many village churches I go to when they tell me there are six or twelve on a normal Sunday morning and I ask how many are there for Harvest they often say "it's standing room only".

There are huge opportunities there if the minister is prepared to get to know the people and love them and care for them. Of course, I am taking for granted that the Gospel is being preached, we're talking about Jesus, we're talking about the cross and the

resurrection and new life and hope and forgiveness. Villagers are in love with their villages, townspeople on the whole like some bits of their town, villagers like the village and if the vicar learns to love the village and its villagers the churches will grow, it's as simple as that.

*Lord Jesus Christ we thank you that the church is your church. We thank you that you are alive, that your Gospel is powerful, that your plan and will is to grow your church. Please help us Lord to think through the issues of the church in the countryside, please help us to have a renewed confidence in the Gospel, in your power and in your purposes for village churches. In your name we pray. Amen.*

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