

## **Faith and the Future of the Countryside Conference:**

### **Notes from the conference.**

3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> November 2010.

The Hayes, Swanwick.

**Attending:** around 200 persons from the Anglican (inc. 20 bishops), Methodist and Baptist churches, and other organisations.

#### **Attending from the Diocese of Peterborough:**

Revd Jim Myners (Rector: Aldwinckle et al); Revd Sarah Brown (SSM: Welford et al & Farm Crisis Network); Nigel Strang (Reader: Pattishall); Revd Robert Hill (Social Responsibility Adviser).

#### **The purpose of the conference.**

The conference was designed to look to the future of rural churches and rural communities 20 years on from the publication of *Faith in the Countryside*.

#### **The aims of the conference were to:**

- Identify recommendations for implementation for the benefit of rural civic society.
- Make recommendations for action by the churches on rural mission and ministry.
- Reflect theologically on issues affecting rural communities and churches.
- Show that churches have an important role in the future of rural communities – especially in relation to the Big Society and associated policies.

#### **The process of the conference:**

Papers with recommendations were presented during Keynote Addresses, seminars and a 'Poster session'. These recommendations were discussed and revised by those attending either in the sessions, via notice boards, or direct discussion with the authors. There were 3 Keynote Addresses, 3 sets of seminar sessions, various Fringe meetings, and a Panel Discussion which included Archbishop Rowan. (see note below)

The papers and recommendations will be collated and published in a book at some time in the future. The key recommendations were refined by the conference at its final session and these were made public on November 8<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Key Recommendations from the Conference:**

- 1) We call upon Government to enable affordable rural housing schemes to proceed where this need is established through a local housing needs survey and a community led plan formulated to an agreed national standard.
- 2) We call upon Government to remove barriers to churches accessing funding for community benefit.
- 3) We urge the Church to recognise and strengthen its contribution to sustainable communities and to use this as a basis for engaging with government and local communities in the Big Society agenda.
- 4) We urge the Government to ensure that proposals about the future of the public forest estate safeguard the ecological, cultural, economic, recreational and spiritual benefits that are already in place.
- 5) Appreciating the distinctive nature, demands and stresses of rural mission and ministry, we recommend that:

- Those in training for public mission and ministry should have effective preparation for rural and multi church work. This should include the preparation and equipping clergy moving to rural posts.
- Church Leaders should develop improved support to address the well being of the clergy and lay officers engaged in rural mission and ministry.
- The rural church continues to explore alternative, flexible and radical models of collaborative mission and ministry.

### **The Archbishop's thoughts.**

Following a Panel Discussion, Archbishop Rowan was invited to say something about the place of the church in rural society today.

He firstly spoke of the need for extracting the ignorance and fantasy out from Media images of the countryside so that the real issues, such as deprivation and isolation, could be seen. He noted the difficulties in expressing rural reality but said that the urban population need to see it.

He expanded on three key words he gave as part of an answer within the Panel Discussion, noting that the church stands as a witness for rural society in terms of community, continuity and death. The church must be involved with issues such as mental health; changing attitudes regarding consumption; 'capacity building' of our communities. That the church will remain when other organisations have left is a sign of continuity and God's presence as well as being 'presence evangelism'. We remind people of their common humanity and mortality, and not just through the silent witness of our graveyards. We are not 'just hanging on', we should be celebrating what we are doing and celebrating the issues of life we witness to.

### **Notes from the main addresses:**

**State of the Countryside.** - Rt Revd Alan Smith, Bishop of St. Albans.

+Alan noted that it was 20 years since *Faith in the Countryside* was published. There are 15,000 rural churches belonging to the 7 major Christian denominations serving a rural population that is growing at a rate of 80,000 each year. 25% of VAT registered companies are in rural areas, yet around 20% of the rural population live below the poverty line. The new 'localism' could restrict the building of affordable housing causing monochrome (middle-class) society villages. The church needs to develop its social responsibility and ask 'What is God doing that we are to join in with?' We need to look at the following areas: Buildings (how we use them); Volunteers (blurring the lines of who does what); Partnership Working (with other rural organisation); Social interaction and care; Spirituality and Worship (meaningful and relevant to people).

**Marks of Mission:** the spread of the gospel through the occasional offices in small a rural village. – Dr Anne Richards, National Adviser for mission theology.

Dr Richards outlines 6 marks of mission for the rural church where Christ is 'uncluttered by official strategies'.

1 – *Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.* Never assume what we do can not reach someone. We are humans before God. We do things that remind others of God. Rural church are good at retelling the story of Christ in their setting.

2 – *Teaching the Baptism.* Using the occasional services to welcome people in and accepting people as ordinary human beings. Give the children something to do rather than expect them to be like little adults etc. Allowing the unsure to ask questions.

3 – *Respond to human needs – Mission as loving service.* What we do is easy to misunderstand from the outside. We need to know the linkages within a parish. Keeping ministers informed of other people’s needs (they’re not telepaths!)

4 – *Transform unjust structures.* It’s easy to see vertical structures of authority, but what are the horizontal structures that support and grow communities?

5 – *Respect the integrity of the world.* Being ‘salt’ and ‘leaven’ in the world, dealing with the realities of the world, not just the niceties of what we want the world to be.

6 – *Care in the environment and community.* Calming the storms of the world. Mission is more inclusive in a rural setting.

**The land and human well-being.** – Prof. Michael Winter, Centre for Rural Policy (Exeter Uni.), Reader and Lay Canon at Exeter Cathedral.

We are in challenging times: Issues of planetary survival. We reach ‘Perfect storm’ situation by 2030. The land is the very stuff of our lives but it is almost taken for granted, yet all of it is important for human well-being; from Chinese rivers to English flood plains, to Dung Beetles. How do we put a value on this? Economists try, but the end point is human well-being (WB). Nations gauge life by GDP not WB. The UN promotes the concept that humans should ‘connect, keep active, keep learning, take notice, give.’ But there are challenges to this line of thinking.

Philosophically, agricultural land is not ‘capital’ – do we value it by cost or dignity? Politically, it will be scary to look at the real possible outcomes – but are there votes in telling the truth?

Scientifically, is stasis ecology possible? “Do we need biodiversity?”  
Most of what we value in land is what/where humans have done to it.

Theologically, we are to accept the gift of the land and engage with it, growing our resilience to the temptation of abusing the land. Whilst we might be swayed by the ‘ologies of science’ (including some theology!?) we need to think of the importance of relationship with the land which is the real theology. Issues to consider include the localisation of divine presence, and our passing through (rather than ownership of) place. Is mankind for the land, or the land for mankind? Where now are the concepts of Rest/Sabbath and Jubilee? Is it just land or is it The Land? In some cultures, people belong to the land, not the other way around. Many rural people here feel the same.

**Planning and Housing:** Power and Values in Rural Communities. – Prof. Mark Shucksmith, Board member of Commission for Rural Communities.

This was a huge issue 20 years ago, and it still is. Unaffordable housing is still an issue because of the exercise of power by those with vested interests. It was noted that only 22 out of 52 characters of fictitious Ambridge could afford to live there, whilst the figure for Emmerdale is 1 in 3. The average 21 year old will now have to wait until their mid 40’s to qualify for a mortgage. 90% of young people need help from their family to buy a house. The cost of rural houses are (25%) higher than urban houses – a situation that is unique to this country. Houses in sparsely populated areas are more expensive than less sparsely populated areas. As settlement decreases so does the percentage of rentable social housing. More social homes are sold on than are built (rate of 4/3). Planning constraints underlie unaffordability. The rich move in when the poor move out.

In all this there is an exercise of power. The illustration was given of a wolf selling a straw house to a pig. Despite many options available to fix this situation, little has been done: There is political gain for the situation to continue.

Three dimensions of power have been identified for this issue:

- Decision making – the powerful always prevail.
- Exclusion of those of less power from the process.
- Non-visible conflict – the most insidious, shaping people through thought.

Power is exercised by shaping peoples preferences, understandings and thinking in such a way that they accept their role or place in the existing order of things. This is named as Symbolic Violence: the violence exercised on someone with their complicity because it seems natural to them. Examples of this include Victorian gender roles, and the definition of cleverness being based on middle-class educational achievement. Those who loose simply acquiesce.

‘Sustainability’ has been defined by the powerful and then used to prevent affordable housing development in rural areas. Issues such as the lack of hospitals in a rural area can close down affordable development. Social thinking at certain times have worked against developments – such as Gremain Greers’ call in the 60’s/70’s for high-rise living and the abolition of villages all together. Such interpretations seem so understandable and ‘reasonable’ that the poor, or ‘losers’, accept it. It was described as ‘A very British version of apartheid.’

What values define an evermore exclusive countryside?

In the late 1880’s it was thought that urban life was characterised by individualism whilst rural life held on to social relationships. That was proved unreal even in those days, but people in rural communities still believe it true today: The image of the Rural Idyll is still strong in the mind. The perception exists that these ‘rural’ values are under threat from ‘urban’ values via commuters, TV and women at work (!) etc.. But if rural communities are really based on social relationships, why are they becoming exclusive? Who is their neighbour when their idyll is perceived to be under threat? Separation from disadvantage become a disadvantage.

Prof Shucksmith called for Government to increase social housing, not decrease it by 60% as has been proposed. Affordable housing should be built into parish council plans, and the church should champion the cause of disadvantaged people in rural areas so that villages do not become ghettos for the elderly and rich.

### **Seminar papers and discussions.**

A number of other conference papers were discussed either in seminar sessions or at a Notice Board session. An Appendix to this report lists the seminar papers with the authors’ précis and attendees’ notes.

Some of the Conference Papers are available from the conference website ([www.rural20.org](http://www.rural20.org)) or via Robert Hill (01536 523603 or [robert.hill@peterborough-diocese.org.uk](mailto:robert.hill@peterborough-diocese.org.uk))

Revd Robert Hill.  
24<sup>th</sup> November 2010.