

METHODIST CONFERENCE 2001 REPORTS

The Future of the Rural Church

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Some rural Methodist churches are thriving, outward looking, welcoming to in-comers and a joyful expression of faith in God, in the 21st Century. Others may be carefully preserving 19th century traditions. Many are struggling, with a few overburdened people, attempting to maintain a Methodist presence in a community. There is a wide variety of ministry in rural churches. Beginning from local experience, this report presents five stories from East Anglia, to represent the rich pattern to be found across the UK. From these stories several key themes emerge that will be highlighted in the report. These themes will be linked to Methodist statements and Government intentions to present realistic guidelines for rural Methodism that will be developed through ongoing commitment to local rural communities.

1.2 ASHILL METHODIST CHURCH

Ashill is a growing village about four miles north west of Watton. There is a small school, with several small businesses and farms located in the village. It has recently suffered a painful split in the Parish Church, leading to the resignation of the Parish Priest and the establishment of an alternative congregation, "The Fountain of Life", with its own Anglican priest. The Methodist Church has gained some Anglicans who were unable to support the changes.

The Methodists are mainly elderly and full of vitality. They run a fortnightly Women's Fellowship and hold an annual Village Carol Service. The chapel has been extensively repaired following a phased programme of refurbishment. This is quite an undertaking for a membership of fourteen with an average age of 80.

Their story is one of struggle, mingled with deep enthusiasm and dedication, expressing their love of God and desire to serve Him in the local community. Their hope is to welcome new, younger people into the Church, even if younger means they are already over 60.

The minister sees the way forward through closer co-operation with the Parish Church. This is shown in the restoration of the annual covenant service, shared between the Anglican and the Methodist congregations.

1.3 WATTON METHODIST CHURCH

Watton is a small market town 22 miles west of Norwich. The main employment is in an abattoir and HM Prison Wayland. There are four Christian denominations worshipping in the town. They meet regularly to share information about activities and to plan more cooperation. There is a real sense of growing together to become a visible sign of Christian unity and witness. There is a desire to learn from each other and a respect for differences.

The Roman Catholic congregation needs to find a new place to worship. It has been suggested that it worships in the Methodist Church. This arrangement may benefit both congregations and despite some uncertainty, it is hoped this is a process through which all may grow.

There is also a strong link between the Methodist and Pentecostal Churches where some Methodists worship from time to time. There is some sharing in mission with an air of openness, although links with the Pentecostals may be the weakest ecumenical relationship.

Methodist people and those from the Parish Church have historically enjoyed good relationships, sharing the financing and managing of the Watton Christian Community Centre. The building is the old Primitive Methodist chapel, renovated eleven years ago, jointly used by the two Churches and a wide variety of local community groups. Whilst this is an opportunity for unity, there is tension in meeting the requirements of the two Churches and the community groups, for events and coffee mornings on the premises.

Recently added to the ecumenical situation is a missionary congregation of the Church of England, "The Fountain of Life", worshipping in the village hall. The congregation belongs to "Churches Together in Watton" contributing significantly in terms of numbers and outreach. It is regarded as different and controversial, because of its style of worship and because it has no parish and buildings of its own.

1.4 FULMODESTON METHODIST CHURCH

Fulmodeston, a village of 100 houses, is ten miles inland from the North Norfolk coast and five miles from the market town of Fakenham. The purchase of property for holiday homes keeps prices high and makes it difficult for local first time buyers to live in the village. Few residents now work in agriculture, but they have an agricultural background and farming families still play an important role in community life. The Post Office/shop survives, opening twice a week. There are four bus services each week, running to Fakenham for market day, King's Lynn market and twice to Norwich, the Saturday service being for football. There is no public house in the village. The attractive village hall is licensed for the sale of alcohol and is the focus of a happy community life.

The Methodist Church was founded in 1865 as part of the Primitive Methodist Connexion, linked with common people and the rise of rural trades unionism. It seats 50 people, is well maintained, but is the only chapel in the Circuit without a flush toilet and kitchen. The present membership of nine is drawn from one long-established family in the village and Methodists from nearby villages where the chapels have closed. Four chapel members are over 70 and two of them are over 80. One service is held each Sunday at 2.30pm. Congregation size varies and may be as low as three. Occasionally holidaymakers attend. Annually the Carol and Harvest Services, plus a concert in the village hall, bring support from other churches in the Circuit and a few people from the village. Whilst people are sympathetic to the chapel they seem unlikely to want to attend regularly. During the winter, monthly "Talks in the Chapel" give about twenty villagers a chance to discuss topics that interest them. Chapel members compile and distribute a monthly village newsletter to every house in the village.

Fulmodeston Parish Church is one of seven in the Snoring Group of Church of England Parishes. It has a small loyal membership. Its Sunday School has recently closed. The Remembrance Day united service alternates between church and chapel. An ecumenical prayer group meets monthly.

Methodism was once an important influence in Fulmodeston. Over the years its congregation and influence has waned. To strengthen the influence, the congregation could upgrade the premises and create more opportunities for sharing fellowship with similar Methodist congregations from other villages. Opposition to women preachers will limit collaboration with the Parish Church. While the chapel remains open, the members feel there is a valuable role to play in the life of the village and in service to the community.

1.5. VILLAGE ECUMENISM IN PARSON DROVE

A close relationship exists between the Methodist Church and the Church of England in Parson Drove, on the Cambridgeshire fens. The buildings stand next door to each other. The Methodists arrived first in 1838 then the Parish Church was built alongside in 1873. The Methodist Church was renewed in 1995, planned when the congregations were still not ready to unite. Now there are two united services each month in alternate buildings.

The Vicar feels that it is good here, because the congregations are the same for each united service, with only one or two exceptions. All enjoy Communion, with God and with each other, without question. For him, St Mark's Methodist Church is warmer and cosier, with better facilities. Emmanuel, Church of England, is larger and better suited to the big occasion, notably funerals. The Parish burial ground is alongside Emmanuel. He wonders how the links may be made more "high profile".

The Methodist Minister poses the question, "Do we move towards uniting as an LEP, finding a way to use both buildings, or do we give time and energy to building up a distinctive Methodist witness in the community, recognising Methodism's financial investment in the new premises?"

1.6 THE VIEWS OF A 30-YEARS-OLD MEMBER OF A VILLAGE CHAPEL

Being a younger member of a village Church is demanding, challenging and hard work. Being young you are looked upon as someone to train for future job replacements, as Sunday School teacher, treasurer, pianist, or preacher. As there are fewer and fewer young members, there are more demands on the few.

It is comforting to have other members, like an extended family, for support and encouragement. This means there are also more elders frowning on the modern way of thinking and the things we younger ones enjoy doing. Having young children is also very difficult, as some older members feel that children should be seen and not heard. Keeping them quiet during a service is impossible; finding things to keep them occupied is the only answer. We started with a corner for children at the back of the church, then a club, combining crche and Sunday School. Numbers are small but interest is growing.

Social pressures make it difficult for young members of a Church. Employers expect you to work all hours of the day and night, seven days a week. Then you have your peers to contend with, as it is felt

that church-going is boring. With so many exciting leisure activities available, if you choose to go to church your peers think you are strange.

You definitely need your faith to be a younger member of the Church, to help you deal with pressures and demands from inside and outside the Church.

The Minister writes in response that the Church concerned here is warm and friendly, an older congregation attracting new people, especially young mothers. Constructive discussion is needed at the Church Council, extra input to support all-age worship and sensitive pastoral care all round. The lay leadership is strong but frequently rests with older people, already over-committed. The rural minister is torn, because of the care needed in seven other Churches at the same time. Traditional services and values may reassert themselves and everyone needs to be attentive to the needs of all the people involved.

2. KEY THEMES IN RURAL METHODISM

2.1 VALUING THE RURAL CONGREGATION

The first theme emerging from the local Chapels is that the congregation is the most valuable resource, for whilst it is ageing, it is certainly energetic. The age of members, some being over 70, is mentioned in four out of the five examples and the membership is involved in significant community service in four out of five Chapels. There is great desire to welcome younger people in two of the stories, with an honest recognition, in one of them, of the tensions they will bring. There is a feeling in one story that young adults are expected to maintain traditional ways of working. Whilst the minister is creating good practice, working with the whole congregation, there is an anxiety that there are too many congregations to be led, all at once. The theme reflects rural Methodism at all levels. There are faithful congregations having a scarce and dwindling resource of members, young people and ministers. The options for the future are often seen in the following terms:

Consolidate by centring the work on a few strategically-located chapels and close the others. Experience shows that members will be lost, others disaffected, transport problems develop, and there is a withdrawal of the Methodist presence from some villages.

Maintain a Chapel in every village, sharing the resources through the circuit system. This continues to provide opportunity for worship in the community that helps to give a sense of identity in the village and offers a focus for shared activities. It is a sign of Methodist commitment to rural life.

Create Cell Groups to express the dream of living the Christian faith with integrity and commitment. They are an attractive alternative for worship, linked closely to the local environment. The disadvantage is that they may become introverted, hard to join and not obviously linked with the wider Church.

An additional way to tackle this situation is to look at the deployment and training of human resources, based on the ministry of the whole people of God in the world. This initiative gives value to the local congregation and its worship of God and the mission with God. In the experience of the compilers of this report, as they work in rural communities, the circuit gives mutual support and corporate identity for

congregations, providing added value and the opportunity for co-operation, especially in the development of people in ministry.

"Phoenix in the Fire" (Resourcing Mission), has gathered a variety of responses to local needs and opportunities by Methodists over the last few years.

2.2 FOSTERING ECUMENICAL CO-OPERATION

A second key theme is fostering ecumenical relationships. This is a feature of four of the stories. Only one mentions an active Churches Together group and in that group the Methodists are the link between all the denominations. There is a note concerning the emergence of non-parochial Church of England Churches. Methodist Standing Orders give guidelines about the use of chapels for religious meetings and Methodism has accepted the use of "Declarations of Ecumenical Welcome and Commitment". Clarity about the ways of working with the Church of England will emerge, as the report of the Formal Conversations is made known.

"Releasing Energy" (Flora Winfield, 2000, Methodist Publishing House) offers a clear aim for ecumenical cooperation as a whole and Anglican-Methodist work in particular. There is a need for connexional guidelines and local initiatives to be in harmony.

2.3 ENABLING TRANSFORMATION IN RURAL AREAS

The third theme to be observed in these stories is the process of enabling transformation in rural areas. At a practical level transformation is seen in the constant upgrading and renewal of Methodist premises recorded in these stories.

The Church of England in these rural areas is experiencing transformation in the creation of non-parochial Churches.

Transformation in worship is being offered through the influence of younger people in membership.

Transformation in the rural communities is being achieved through Methodist social caring.

Transformation is a painful process, threatening security. With courage and vision it is possible to identify needs and objectives and establish a process of transformation, whereby the village Chapel with its roots and traditions in the past, may undergo a renewal that will create joy and freedom in worship, love and peace in community and re-establish the basic principles of ethical living.

2.4 GUIDELINES FOR THE FUTURE

The five stories from East Anglia with the three key concepts of valuing rural congregations, fostering ecumenical co-operation and enabling transformation, raise a further question. Is it possible to produce guidelines for the future of the rural Methodist Church and continuing ministry in rural areas? East Anglia has provided five stories and three key concepts that represent local rural voices to begin the process. They need to be linked with Methodist connexional purposes such as listed in the *"Our Calling"* leaflets or *"Called to Love and Praise"* (1999). Strategies listed for the countryside in the Government's

rural white paper, *"Our Countryside: The Future"* (2000), also provide a wider context for the policy guidelines. A conflation of these three facets, local voices, Methodist practices and Government intentions, results in the following statement of policy:

3. RURAL METHODIST CHURCH POLICY

3.1 VALUING THE RURAL CONGREGATION

- By recognising its history and tradition
- By listening to its needs and visions
- By developing openness to change
- By providing effective resources for its worship and mission
- By affirmation of the ministry of the whole people of God in the world
- By sharing stories of joyful experiences of God's Grace
- By encouraging experimentation in worship
- By programmes of discipleship and life-long learning
- By making more followers of Jesus Christ
- By effective pastoral links with all Methodist members
- By upgrading all premises
- By encouraging creative arts in rural Methodism
- By imaginative appreciation of the beauty of creation and environment
- By rural-urban links within 30 miles
- By accepting the challenge of Information Technology
- By "rural proofing" all policies at every level of Methodism

3.2 FOSTERING ECUMENICAL CO-OPERATION

- By naturally working ecumenically
- By co-operating to ensure Christian worship in each village
- By acting as a bridge between Christian denominations
- By imaginative use of all church buildings for the needs of the community

- By sharing of human resources for the needs of the community
- By observing the Christian rural calendar eg Rogation Sunday
- By developing rural chaplaincies
- By supporting Ecumenical Rural Officers
- By linking with the Arthur Rank Centre
- By support of Farm Crisis & Rural Stress Information Networks

3.3 ENABLING TRANSFORMATION IN RURAL AREAS

- By supporting local food economies
- By supporting local schools
- By challenging rural deprivation and social exclusion
- By seeking safer communities
- By supporting programmes against racism
- By encouraging affordable rural housing
- By sharing transport where possible
- By using local places of worship, whatever denomination
- By working with the Government's Market Towns initiative
- By ensuring small settlements are not deprived by Market Towns initiative
- By showing solidarity with the Farming Community
- By engaging in environmental programmes
- By partnership with Parish Councils and encouraging Methodist involvement
- By supporting rural tourism

"Whatever the future holds, it is vital that a vision for the Church - and for each local Church - should be inspired and maintained by Scripture and tradition, by contemporary experience and need and, not least, by the Holy Spirit firing imagination, mind and heart." (*"Called to Love and Praise"* 2000:54).

Neil Bramble Chapman, Methodist Minister

Rachel Larkinson, Methodist Minister

David Yarham, Methodist Local Preacher

Malcolm Braddy, Methodist Minister (Convenor)

Lent 2001

The following resolution will appear on the Order Paper for Thursday 28 June 2001:

*****RESOLUTION**

39/1 The Conference receives the Report.