

Some considerations from

What's In Your Hands?
(Exodus 4:2)

Key insights into developing your rural mission strategies at diocesan or deanery level
a learning review report based on ten projects (20 pages; published May 2025)
commissioned by The Church of England's Vision and Strategy Team

Rural Realities

- One might distinguish between deep rural (small dispersed villages), connected rural (villages with good connections to nearby towns, which thereby often function as commuter settlements or dormitories), and market towns. Growth in deep rural settings was harder and slower
- It can be easier to identify shared challenges than ways forward
- Old church buildings can take a lot of energy and may be unsuitable (e.g. no loo)
- A lack of missional imagination can be a real barrier to growth, as can a narrative of decline or the task of institutional maintenance
- Complex leadership especially in multi-parish benefices makes change harder. Sometime lay leadership was difficult to secure
- Church communities tend to defend what they know and can resist change
- Where people know the few regulars well, it can be hard to break. Effort is needed to offer a real outward facing welcome

Conclusions and Recommendations

- No simple transferable models were identified
- There may be lessons for rural ministry from outer estates ministry e.g. due to relatively settled and marginal populations where growth can be hard
- A sense of possibility and renewal of hope are vital. Projects can be the start of a journey that opens people up to something new. Seek to build confidence and creativity. Give permission to risk / try things / fail / learn / adapt towards a culture of experimentation. Make space for the truly innovative allowing a mixed economy of parish and pioneering
- Encourage people to develop and adapt as they go not stick with one method
- It is essential to show that the rural is valued. "The diocese" cares about every parish
- Resources are limited. In some places this can be an opportunity e.g. if the church is the only "public" building in the community. It may be good to "dream small". Sometimes in a rural context, small is fine / expected. Resource constraint can lead to innovation and focus rather than being able to carry on with everything even if it is ineffective
- Consider the quantitative and qualitative metrics for success carefully, possibly using The Five Marks of Mission¹. Growth can be subtle and was normally less than expected. Targets for growth were often unrealistic. Impact was generally small and

¹ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

very provisional. People spoke of potential, green shoots and first fruits rather than obvious brilliant final results in terms of new church members. There was little evidence of substantial discipleship impact in these reports

- Demographics in deep rural areas mean that maintaining Sunday numbers is growth in disguise. Parishes have to “grow” to stand still. Keeping going can be success
- There can be tensions between new and pre-existing church members. There is a danger that some pioneering initiatives can be seen as competition to traditional parish churches. Relatively detached or free-floating pioneer projects were less effective than those which related closely to existing parish structures
- Focus on those who need help or those with potential?
- Identify your “stars” and what’s on their hearts [find a good term for this]. Look to support leaders who are already doing something / entrepreneurs who can also work within structures and co-operate with others. Rather than simply looking for the gaps, look where there is energy
- Enabling leadership can bring together those with ideas and the desire for change and provide them with the opportunities and resources they need to generate new approaches and initiatives
- Leadership development is key. Invest in change agents. Local churches must buy in to the priority of mission
- Relational support, peer to peer networking / coaching / mentoring / action learning sets were appreciated. There was a desire for clear governance, ongoing commitment and support, and for active oversight from a senior diocesan level
- Five-year project timescales are often too short
- No appointment is better than a bad appointment
- A clear pathway (with small steps) from first contact with the church to commitment to discipleship and ministry should be offered. The goal is not only attendance but knowing Jesus and making him known
- The use of the outdoors and of pilgrimage could be particular rural contributions
- Ordinands should be encouraged to experience rural ministry and rural leadership should be considered in IME1, IME2, and CMD
- One cannot over communicate enough e.g. the desire to engage rural parishes in mission. Take up of messages was always patchy
- Parishes working together effectively was one positive outcome of some projects
- Less money over a longer time scale might be better. Too much money can be distracting or even counterproductive and it can be hard when it stops
- What stories can we share / examples can we celebrate (including of risk taking rather than only of tangible success)? How do we pass on learnings?

See: <https://churchsupporthub.org/all-resources/learning-review-on-strategy-for-rural-mission/>

And <https://churchsupporthub.org/all-resources/whats-in-our-hands-rural-mission-learning-review/>

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