

Diocese of Chichester Rural Conference 2026
Being Rural, Being Fruitful
Break Out Group

Some reflections from Scripture and experience, and discussion questions on
ABIDING AND HARVESTING

Overlap with other breakout group themes e.g. rootedness, pruning (John 15:2)

ABIDING

Abiding in Christ The Vine (John 15:1-10, 16) – The word for “abide”, *menō*, is the ordinary word for stay or remain. It could mean to continue, (in)dwelt, lodge, sojourn, live, rest, settle, last, endure, survive, be existent, continue unchanged, be permanent, persevere, be constant, be steadfast, be in close and settled union, stay at home, stay where one is, be fixed, stand, hold good, wait (for)

“in Christ” – “Believing in / into Christ” – united to Christ by faith in the Spirit

Christ as the source of life

Notice the relationship with Jesus’ words – v3, v7 – cf. v10 obeying Jesus’ commandments – key to remaining in Christ is having his word remain in us – how can we hear, know and remember his words?

Obeying Jesus and loving one another implies activity. Abiding is not the opposite of activity.

Activity from rest, on the basis of grace, from fullness, arising from the gospel, empowered by the Spirit, not our own unaided effort – not earning or deserving God’s favour but knowing we are already accepted and loved – cf. Matthew 3:17 at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry – our secure identity in Christ – the foundational importance of Morning Prayer for remembering the gospel, receiving grace afresh, offering the day to God and seeking his help

Our part and God’s part – “We plough the fields and scatter...” – Fruit as a natural consequence of spiritual life in Christ (vv4-5), not something we have to work up or manufacture

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” (1 Corinthians 3:6)

We can be very busy and seemingly successful - but our complete dependence on Christ for a lasting spiritual work

Expecting, praying for, seeking growth but avoiding the success syndrome (parables of growth) – realistic but hopeful expectations – in some circumstances keeping the lights on and the doors open may be a triumph – e.g. if two pubs have closed, but three churches are still open

Being faithful so as to be fruitful – doing the fundamental things well, not just a clever scheme or gimmick – no golden bullet except for abiding in Christ!

Abiding in a certain place

Double contextualisation – “in Christ and in Corinth” etc. (1 Corinthians 1:2, similarly Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1 etc.)

What difference does place, this place, make?

E.g. Atwell and Ambrose, *How Village Churches Thrive: A Practical Guide* (Church House Publishing) – particular opportunities if your church building is the only community space in the village – one of my villages: the church, the pub and the village hall as a three-legged stool of village life

There is much that is common to all people and ministry. Rural people are people! Rural ministry is ministry! – but what could we say especially about rural people (generally speaking!) and rural ministry in particular?

Mark Scarlata’s use of the French wine-making term *terroir* (lit. land / soil) – everything in the ecosystem of a place that gives the fruit its own special character – How would you characterise the *terroir* of your parish and its effects?

What are the distinctives of your villages and what difference might that make?
What do you know of their history / story etc.?

The church as in the world yet not of the world

Distinctive – salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) – sometimes more weird than we need to be?!

How (a) well connected are you individually and as a church to your wider community?
(b) How distinctive are you? Do you make a difference / have a particularly Christian impact?

Are the people who go to your church known as Christians in the wider community? Coming out!

Could you say something about your Christian motivation, or offer to pray?
What’s the difference between a lovely, kind, helpful non-Christian and a believer?
What would crossing the pain barrier of social embarrassment to speak for Christ be like for you?

The village fayre and marquee service – cost, effort, volunteers pulled this way and that – worth it?

Sanctified hanging out? The Vicar as professional fete goer / event-attender!

Vicar visibility / availability? The clerical collar as barrier or bridge? The value of taking one's time – having a dog or baby with you if you really want people to stop and talk to you! Perhaps regularly having a coffee outside the village shop or in the pub – or even advertising that the Vicar will generally be in the café 10am – 10:30am on Wednesdays, you are welcome to join her

The Incarnation as a model for ministry – not merely an announcement or a brief intervention but 33 years of sharing the life of a family, community, church, society

Deep involvement over time, faithful presence but also intentionality

How might people go from general awareness and good-will to interest and regular active involvement?

What might the next step for this person be?

Are we deliberately seeking to make disciples and making this a matter of prayer?
Church growth prayer – bookmark – encourage prayer for 3 individuals

The Sunday morning shop front – which may not always be super professional and polished!

People are not expecting St Paul's Cathedral or Holy Trinity, Brompton or... in your tiny village

What can you do well? Are there ways that small can be beautiful?

Other avenues in addition to the Sunday morning service? How can people enquire, grow, serve?

Readiness – preparedness – 1 Peter 3:15-16, “in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

How can I get ready *now* so that I can ready *if and when*?

Could every committed member in my church say something about:

- (a) The good news of Jesus
- (b) How they became a Christian / the difference Jesus makes to them (e.g. hope, peace in the face of illness or bereavement)

Would some training / practice be helpful?

Resources? - uk.10ofthose.com/ - thegoodbook.co.uk/ - [321.speaklife.org.uk/course/321 - https://inspiring-faith.com/](http://321.speaklife.org.uk/course/321-https://inspiring-faith.com/)

- A gospel leaflet e.g. *Two Ways to Live, Why Jesus?* – What would you recommend?
- A gospel in a modern English Translation e.g. The New International Version (NIV)
- A flyer invite to a forthcoming event

What have you used that has worked? What might help you?

The church building as an abiding sign – and sometimes a challenge! – cf. Philip Larkin, *Church Going* (1954), “A serious house on serious earth”

How can you make the most of your church building? For welcome and evangelism?

What are the advantages and dangers of a long-term ministry?

A relatively stable population cf. a university town / Zones 1 & 2

Proper locals three generations in the churchyard!

Locals / incomer tensions? Complaints about the church clock or bells!

A particular point of opportunity when people first move in to the village and are looking to get to know people – How can we make the most of that? a welcome visit, introduction, invite – parish magazine / leaflet / welcome pack – spotting SOLD signs / people moving in!

Life events / occasional offices for multiple generations – connected repeatedly with the same families over time

The opportunities of really knowing people and place – much more possible in a benefice of 2000 than a parish of 10000 or more

How might we keep fresh over the long term / get new ideas? Willingness to try new things, to experiment, to fail – “Oh, we tried that once, it didn’t really work” – having a good network of people who get it – visiting other churches – arranging for a mystery worshiper to visit your church – the power of a fresh pair of eyes – honestly, how was the welcome?! – abiding in Christ! – not sustained only by stimulating changing circumstances but by deep eternal truths

HARVESTING

The harvest of the great final day – “Come ye thankful people, come!” - The Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30; 31-43) – v39, “the harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels”- vv28-30, patience!

The Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly - Mark 4:26-29 – the inherent power of the Word / Gospel / Kingdom – a rebuke to our activism – the Kingdom of God doesn’t depend on me doing clever stuff brilliantly or...!

How might this perspective of a great final harvest shape ministry now?

Seriousness / urgency – more than keeping a building or institution going – an eternal / heavenly horizon

Hopeful confidence - The apparent failure and ultimate fruitfulness of the word – How strategic and effective is this Sower?! 30, 60 or 100 times what is sown – Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23)

The Lord's Other Prayer – Matthew 9:37-38 – ““The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” – Jesus knew how hard it is to get volunteers! – A harvest now before the great final day

The especially porous boundaries of the rural C of E – a strength? – a weakness?

People might already think they belong – a kind of assumed British middle-class nominal (?) Christianity? Your village a bit behind Brighton or New York, more vestiges of Christendom remaining?

How might belonging and believing relate? Do people want to feel they belong and then come to believe?

Opportunities for conscious decision and commitment – baptism – confirmation – renewal of baptismal promises – saying the creed! – Holy Communion – a prayer of commitment – some act of commitment / definite response – signing up to some group or activity – joining the church WhatsApp group / Electoral Roll? – moving in to discipleship, service, vocation

Do we make it easy for people to try out / join up / serve? If I teach the Sunday school one week, will I still be doing it when I'm 85?!

Church / Helicopter joke – anonymity of a cathedral or v large church – harder in a small rural church!

Do they feel they need permission come to something / break in to a clique? So and so always does that... So and so's seat

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In what ways do you find these metaphors of abiding and harvesting helpful or not?

What might you want to add as really important for fruitful rural ministry?

One thing I'd like to think about more...

One thing we might do (or do differently)...

If you have any good suggestions, please do share them!

The Revd Canon Marc Lloyd
Rector of Warbleton, Bodle Street Green & Dallington
Rural Dean of Dallington
marc_lloyd@hotmail.com