

The Rural Strategy

A Distinctively Rural Church



The Rural Strand is one of the five key strands of *growing church bringing hope*, our diocesan strategy. We have produced a series of leaflets that describe the work we've done since March 2017, to explain how it will make a difference to the church in the large rural parts of our diocese. We hope that they

will be a useful tool for deaneries and PCCs right across the diocese.

The key aim of the Rural Strand is rightly ambitious. We wish to ensure that there continues to be a lively church presence in every rural community, responsive to local needs, resilient to social change and eager to preach the gospel in word and deed. We've been charged with re-imagining rural mission and ministry to enable the church to grow deeper and stronger and in a way that is sustainable.

What is 'rural'?

The accepted definition is that settlements are rural if they are detached from larger conurbations and have a population of 10,000 people or less. This means that around 17% of the English population lives in rural areas and around 40% of the active membership of the Church of England.

What rural looks like here

Around 46% of the population of Northumberland lives in rural areas. Rural settlement in the diocese is sometimes sparse and often isolated. Over 10% of the population of Northumberland, for example, live in hamlets and isolated dwellings; the national rural average is 3.5%. And yet modern working patterns mean that those who live in the most deeply rural parts of the diocese do not always work there. The rural population is also increasingly elderly. Work is hard to find for young people and housing is too expensive. Older people replace them in increasing numbers, sometimes seeking rural life as a reward, yet other people are isolated and live in significant, often hidden poverty. Fuel poverty is a particular problem. Rural wages are lower than those in urban

areas which helps to compound the problem. The bottom line is that there are many different kinds of rural community and many different ways of being rural.

Farming is the most visible economic activity across large areas of the diocese even though it employs less than 5% of the rural population. Hill farms, the vast majority tenanted (four estates own 50% of the National Park), contrast with mixed farming in the Tyne Valleys, mid Northumberland and the coastal plain, where arable is the norm. There are market towns, commuter villages and former industrial areas. Forestry and forestry products, the water industry and, of course, tourism, which contributes 14% of income in the County of Northumberland, all make significant contributions to the rural economy, as do new industries including pharmaceuticals, advanced engineering and the food and drink industries. It is a complex picture which underlines the rich variety of very different 'ruralities'.

Challenges for the rural church

We must take seriously the wider context illustrated by the evidence from National Statistics for Mission which show that the Church of England is in decline. Numbers of typical weekly attendance, baptisms, weddings and funerals are all falling.

Many rural churches are inevitably small. This reflects the size of dispersed rural communities they serve, but this does not necessarily mean that they are moribund or struggling more than their urban neighbours. The number of growing churches remains broadly similar in both urban and rural contexts (around 18%). There is also strong evidence that small rural churches (with 30 or less regular attendees) show stronger growth rates than larger

churches (urban and rural). While some congregations are indeed small, elderly and vulnerable, others are lively and with a level of attendance not very different from that seen two generations ago. And some rural churches are growing significantly.

Contrary to popular imaginings, the model of a priest in every rural parish has never normally characterised the English Church, and yet increasing pressure on resources, financial and human are taking their toll. The cost of maintaining and insuring buildings is sometimes daunting, matched by ever-more stringent standards of necessary maintenance.

Multi-parish benefices have become larger and it has become more difficult to sustain a pattern of worship, and more particularly Eucharistic worship, across every parish (though weekly Eucharist was not the rural norm until a couple of generations ago). Some commentators (for example, Bob Jackson in his recent paper on 'focal ministry'), have claimed that the growth in size of multi-parish benefices has led to a decline of mission, but such a correlation is certainly not inevitable or always supported by convincing evidence.

The future of the rural church

Any stories of growth must not allow us to be complacent. The general trend remains unsustainable. Change is necessary, but it must be the right change, hence initiatives such as **growing church bringing hope**, which is a wide-ranging, whole diocesan, long-term strategy for change rather than simply an attempt to balance the books.



Our strategy must take careful account of the distinctive character of the church in its setting. In our diocese this means that given the complex picture of rural life and of what rural looks like, there cannot be a simple one-size-fits-all solution to meet the needs of every rural (or indeed urban) parish. We also have to take special account of the fact that the rural parishes of the Diocese of Newcastle are amongst the most deeply rural in the Church of England in that we have the lowest density of buildings in the country at 8.9 square miles per parish church (in comparison, the density in the Diocese of Hereford, often cited as a typically rural diocese, is 4.1 square miles per parish church).

This raises some important and intriguing questions. For example, do our rural churches have a different and greater significance as a focus of community identity and life than in those places where communities lie so much closer together? Is it more difficult here to create large benefices that may cross historic, physical and psychological boundaries? For example, the Moorland group of parishes joins together parishes in two different valleys, counties and political constituencies with all the very different allegiances that are associated with a profound sense of place.

There *can* be a bright future

The initiative provided through **growing church bringing hope** is a fresh opportunity to develop sustainable, appropriate and imaginative collaborative ministry models, teams, parochial structures and ways of working for the rural church. The Rural Strand has been working hard to make a difference. We explain our ideas and the real progress we've made in the first set of accompanying leaflets (others will follow soon):

- **New Ways of Collaborative Working**
- **Fresh thinking about buildings: Rural Churches for Everyone**
- **Research and Vision**



The Rural Strategy

New Ways of Collaborative Working

The initiative provided through **growing church bringing hope** is an opportunity to develop fresh ways of working for the rural church. These must be sustainable, appropriate and imaginative. They include collaborative models of ministry, including teams and 'focal ministers' along with new parochial structures.



We have identified six different approaches which will establish new forms of ministry in the rural areas of the diocese. Each approach is collaborative in its intention. They are:

1. Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams, developing effective lay leadership, sometimes across traditional boundaries of parishes and benefices.

2. Community engagement as the context for church growth and development aided by a 'Bishop's Mission Order' (see below).
3. Leading and growing one church at a time through the development of 'focal ministers' supported by incumbents in multi-parish benefices.
4. Creating collaboration through a strategic approach to rural church buildings in the Rural Churches for Everyone programme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.
5. Growing fresh expressions of church through the deployment of Pioneer Ministers.
6. Setting up intentional minister-based models in market and county towns.

Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams

Team working has always been at the heart of **growing church bringing hope**. Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams are one important way in which we can achieve this.

They build on a rich and active legacy of working in partnership between lay and ordained people in the service of the local community and church and they are underpinned by the biblical concept of the royal priesthood of the people of God.

Every person, we believe, has received gifts through their baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit to

play a full part in the ministry of the church which is the body of Christ.

Our hope is that with and through the establishment of Mission and Ministry Teams a greater number of people will be able to exercise their skills in both ministry and mission.

They will not be uniform in size or function but will share a number of essential characteristics: they will help identify new skills and gifts that we have not recognised before; they will be mutually supportive and they will build on the particular legacy of working together that was built up within the former Local Ministry Scheme.



They will have a mandate from a PCC or group of PCCs working together and will derive authority to work from a partnership between the PCC(s), incumbent and the Bishop.

Such teams will, of course, need to be carefully supported, monitored and evaluated, using peer group learning as a tool to achieve this, and we will find ways in which to share good practice.

They must also be robust enough to withstand changes in key personnel over the years, especially during clerical vacancies.

Out of all this we hope and pray that new models of ministry will emerge and that through the work of the Mission and Ministry Leadership Team the church will not only grow but will also be better equipped to serve God's mission in the world. Collaboration will be a key part of the future of the rural church and will enable the church to be a more effective resource for community resilience and development - in partnership with other groups and individuals within the community.

Focal Ministers

The idea of focal ministers builds very simply on the reality that in some communities, especially in the more isolated, rural parts of the diocese there is often someone who is a 'go to' person who links the local church and the community. They will usually be a member of a larger Ministry and Mission Team, in some instances an ordained person, who will work closely with and be answerable to existing parish ministers, lay and ordained.

When benefices are large, such a hands-on identification with a particular place can prove very valuable if that person, like the members of the Ministry and Mission Teams is properly trained, supported and their work is monitored and evaluated.

New Parochial Structures

As we reflected and consulted within the diocese we realised that a collaborative approach means that it

can be more important to create new relationships, even across traditional boundaries, *before* changing structures. We also recognise that the different approaches to rural ministry (see above) each represent a collaborative approach that forms new relationships in mission and ministry. We strongly believe that the emergence and establishment of such new relationships must happen prior to new formal structures – and will then also inform and help to shape them.

We do not believe that bigger benefices with fewer stipendiary clergy should be our default position *per se*, but that a range of innovative new arrangements will emerge out of the six approaches that we have outlined, not excluding fewer parishes, churchwardens and PCCs.

Structures in the early church grew out of the movement of God's Spirit, but they could not help but also be human organisations. This human dimension meant that they sometimes did not allow human beings to flourish as God intends. They are by their very nature provisional and imperfect and new structures have continually emerged. Our task is to try to ensure that these are as informed by God's will and purpose for the church and the world as fully as possible.

Bishop's Mission Order

This is a special measure that enables fresh expressions of church collaboration to flourish between or across parish boundaries.

Change Arenas

This is a way of describing those places, usually more than one parish or benefice, that are seeking to

implement the goals and vision set out by the Rural Strand of **growing church bringing hope**. There are currently about 25 such 'arenas'. Their identity has emerged out of the deanery development process that began in 2010.

A key element in their development is effective project planning and monitoring in line with the six approaches we have already outlined. This is being managed by the Rural Strand in partnership with deaneries.

The common feature of each change arena is a deep desire to consider making the right changes to existing models of collaboration and parochial structures to enable mission and ministry to be carried out more effectively and for growth to be planned and implemented.



The Rural Strategy

Fresh thinking about buildings: Rural Churches for Everyone



The Rural Strand of **growing church bringing hope** believes that rural church buildings are an essential resource at the heart of our communities. They have the potential to be integrated community assets of the greatest value as well as a powerful and enduring witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are convinced that it is vital that there is a rationale for the presence of each church building within the diocese - now and for the foreseeable future.

The future and sustainability of rural church buildings is a national issue that we take very seriously, one that has been addressed for example, by the government-funded 2017 Taylor Review into the sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals, but one that also requires local responses and approaches.

Each and every building requires a unique selling point. In other words, we need to be clear what particular contribution each rural church building can make towards the overall mission and ministry of the parish, benefice, deanery or diocese.



We believe that this is a fresh way of approaching a strategic plan for rural church buildings that will enable them to become more resilient and to adapt to their changing environment.

Church buildings are not 'ends in themselves' but serve the wider needs of the church and of the communities in which they are set. By definition, they are for everyone in their parish, in almost every rural community and offer a space in which a very wide range of community functions and activities may take place, as they have always done.

For many people buildings embody the church. Indeed for most people the 'church' means the church building itself. Church buildings are also a visual and historic focal point of many rural communities. We see this as a rich opportunity, a gift, and not a threat or distraction.

Rural Churches for Everyone

The Rural Churches for Everyone project works with communities across the rural areas of the Diocese in order to ensure a sustainable future for church buildings.

The project enables clusters of



churches to work collaboratively at a local level to plan collectively and strategically for their buildings by growing local capacity to care for them and by identifying changes that will secure their future.

The Rural Churches for Everyone project is supported by multiple local partners and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Building on the work of the Inspired North East programme it addresses the limited capacity of individual church management teams by bringing representatives of forty two church buildings together into four clusters.

Within Rural Churches for Everyone, each church cluster has a small nominated team consisting of church and community volunteers drawn from across the cluster.

Each team is supported via an intensive consultancy programme to create a strategy and business plan for the care and development of the churches in their cluster. A training programme covers themes such as sustainable tourism, curating exhibitions, greening historic buildings and welcoming visitors.



Some members of each team receive additional training to enable them to provide direct church buildings support to churches within their cluster.

As the project progresses, one church in each cluster will deliver a building improvement project intended to 'kick start' the change and strategic development process across the cluster. Sixteen churches engaged in the project will achieve Community Action Northumberland's 'Hallmark' standard for community facilities: the 'Aspire Award.'

The project is being led by Newcastle Diocese through a dedicated Project Officer and delivered by a partnership including Community Action Northumberland, Newcastle University Centre for Rural Economy, North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Northumberland National Park.

The project will also develop and test new approaches to evaluation and train volunteers to carry out evaluations which will inform the development of new programmes of support for rural church buildings and communities.

Project Team

Philippa Craig is the Project Officer who coordinates the Rural Churches for Everyone project for the Diocese.

She comes to the diocese after working with one of our key partners, Northumberland National Park Authority. Philippa took over in February 2020 from Elanor Johnson.

Philippa is supported in her role by Yvonne Conchie who is the project's consultant on strategic development and business planning. Yvonne has an outstanding track record in independent heritage consultancy.

If you are interested in finding out more or getting involved, please contact Philippa on p.craig@newcastle.anglican.org or 0191 270 410

The project also has its own very lively, well-maintained Facebook page: [@RuralChurchesforEveryone](https://www.facebook.com/RuralChurchesforEveryone)



The Rural Strategy

Research and Vision



The Rural Strand of the diocesan **strategy growing church bringing hope** aims to re-imagine rural mission and ministry in Newcastle Diocese to ensure there is a positive church presence in every rural community that is responsive to local need, resilient to social change, growing in every dimension of church life and sustainable.

The strategy was launched in March 2017 and is a five-year programme with five key strands. One of these is the Rural Strand. A Guiding Coalition was

set up to provide strategic direction in how to rise to the rural challenges, led by the Venerable Peter Robinson, the Archdeacon of Lindisfarne and the Bishop's Rural Affairs adviser the Rev'd Jonathan Mason, together with a small group of lay people and clergy who have considerable experience of the rural church and its setting. It meets monthly and three times a year invites a wider reference group to meet with it and receive feedback from the wider rural church.

We began by trying to understand better some of the challenges being faced in rural communities, to build upon the rural network. We published a rural vision document and nurtured some low-key interventions. These included rural pioneer ministry in former coalfield areas of South East Northumberland and the preparations for a rural Bishop's Mission Order prioritising community engagement as the context for church growth in the Glendale area of North Northumberland. The first Mission and Ministry Leadership Team was established as a pilot project in the rural west of Morpeth Deanery with a half stipend being shared between a lay and ordained minister.

You can find more information about what all these initiatives mean in the leaflet 'New Ways of Collaborative Working.'

We reflected carefully on these initiatives and produced detailed strategy papers on a wide range of aspects of rural life and ministry, all carefully related to the key aims of **growing church bringing hope**. If you wish to read these documents, they are all available on the Rural Strand section of the diocesan website:

www.newcastle.anglican.org/vision/rural

Our Vision and Goals

The Rural Strand's vision in the context of the diocesan vision is for a rural church that will truly become a **growing church bringing hope** and in doing so make its distinctive contribution to the life of the whole diocese as it is transformed through the diocesan strategy.



We believe that for this vision to be achieved the rural church must fulfil the following objectives. The rural church will:

1. Worship locally and with openness to new patterns of worship, new styles of worship and fresh types of congregations.
2. Be confident and engaged with developing the church's life and mission. This will include training for lay and ordained, the development of discipleship, the nurture of lay worship leaders and the growth of clergy able to focus on delivering the vision.

3. Be regarded by other institutions, communities and individuals as a significant partner/player in the development of local communities.
4. Be valued, by itself and others, as sacred space that holds and shares the Christian story and its heritage in Northumberland and beyond.
5. Become a church that has embraced a holistic and varied understanding and practice of growth: in numbers of people who value, respect and engage with their parish church; in numbers of these who are positively impacted by the church; and in openness to how church growth might happen.

Case Studies

We have decided to conduct a series of Case Studies involving nine rural multi-parish benefices to gather evidence about the ways in which changing patterns and structures of governance and ministry have impacted on the life of the rural church. The learning from these case studies, some of which also embrace elements of a pilot study, will provide invaluable evidence about what works and why it works. They will also indicate – and confirm to the Guiding Coalition how the different instruments of collaboration, sometimes in subtle combination, contribute to various dimensions of church growth. The framework provided by the vision and goals of the rural strand will be the backdrop for their analysis.

The case studies will enable the local church to understand in the light of new collaborations how parochial and pastoral structure might best be organised to support and enable a re-imagined rural church. As case studies come to fruition it may be

that new collaborative instruments will be piloted and explored – all part of the developing mixed economy of minister and mission.

Workshops

We are running a highly successful series of ‘contextual practice workshops’. These are open to everyone and emphasise the importance of combining theology and practice to enable the growth of the church. The rural strand already networks with over 100 people, lay and ordained in every rural part of the diocese.



The workshops have enabled the Guiding Coalition to curate a space for learning, theological reflection and conversation on key rural issues. They have enabled the communication of different aspects of the Rural Strand’s work and of the diocesan vision through dialogue and debate. They represent the essential participation of the grass roots of the rural church and have created significant ownership of the Rural Strand’s work. Crucial links are made in each workshop between the life and challenges experienced in the diversity of rural communities - a key link between the lively approach to rural life shown by many individuals and their communities in Northumberland, Cumbria and County Durham.

So far workshops have been:

1. At The Sill (the new Landscape Discovery Centre): Theology and Landscape
2. In Wooler: Encountering Rural Poverty: making a Difference
3. In Blanchland: Sacred Space and Community
4. In Slaley: A Day with Lord Curry of Kirkharle on rural communities and agriculture
5. In Bamburgh: The Rural Church and Sustainable Tourism

Forthcoming (dates to be finalised): workshops on market towns, pilgrimage, tourism and resources for rural worship. Each workshop is reported in detail and is developing into a key resource for local and contextual rural practical theology.

Reports on all the workshops can be found on of the diocesan website.



The pictures in this leaflet were taken during the first two workshops