***growing church bringing hope***

The Rural Strand of the Newcastle Diocesan Strategy

**1. In brief …**

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

This is a summary of phase one of the Rural Strand’s work since the launch of the diocesan strategy in March 2017. It also outlines the way ahead from the present until the five-year strategy concludes in March 2022: phase two.

The purpose of this document is to enable the story of the Rural Strand to be communicated to deaneries in the second half of 2019. We hope that this will enable deeper ownership and understanding in deanery communities in preparation for phase two of the delivery of the strategy.

**2. Some background**

National Statistics for Mission show that measured by, for example, typical weekly attendance and the number of baptisms, weddings and funerals, the Church of England is in decline. The present trend is clearly unsustainable. Change is necessary, hence initiatives such as *growing church bringing hope*, which is a holistic, diocesan-wide strategy for change rather than simply an attempt to balance the books.

Around 17% of the English population lives in rural areas (in settlements with a population of 10,000 or less), but 40% of the active membership of the Church of England is rural. While many churches are necessarily small, reflecting the size of dispersed rural communities, the number of growing churches remains broadly similar in both urban and rural contexts (around 18%). There also is strong evidence that small rural churches (with 30 or less regular attendees) show stronger growth rates than larger churches.

The rural parishes of the Diocese of Newcastle are by far the most deeply rural in the Church of England at 8.9 square miles per parish church. In comparison, the density in the Diocese of Hereford is 4.1 square miles per parish church. While some congregations are indeed small, elderly and vulnerable, as they are also in many urban areas, others are lively and with a level of attendance not very different from that seen two generations ago. Also, some rural churches are growing significantly.

Contrary to popular imaginings, it is clear that 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 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. 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, though, again, such a correlation is certainly not inevitable, nor always supported by convincing evidence.

The contemporary pressure on the availability of precious resources – not just financial - presents the rural parts of Newcastle diocese with as significant a challenge as it does in urban and suburban areas. However, the members of the Guiding Coalition of the Rural Strand have been consistent in their reflections that a proper response to this challenge needs, of necessity, to be distinctly rural, reflecting the reality of rural church affiliation and the diversity of rural communities.

It is clear that the rural church must also therefore learn re-engage with the local community and refocus on mission and ministry through new patterns of leadership. It must devise parochial and administrative structures that are better suited to local needs and above all be ready to enable growth to happen wherever possible, both numerical growth and growth in confidence and commitment.

**3. A Rural Diocese?**

There are of course, several 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 farming 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 the income in the County of Northumberland and rising - 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’, many of them significantly remote from urban setting and which point towards the contextual approach that the Rural Strand has taken in its work.

**4. What the Rural Strand has achieved**

Following the launch of ***growing church bringing hope*** in March 2017, a Rural Strand ‘Guiding Coalition’ was established to provide strategic direction in how to rise to the rural challenges. This is led by the Venerable Peter Robinson, Archdeacon of Lindisfarne and the Bishop’s Rural Affairs adviser the Rev’d Jonathan Mason. The Guiding Coalition has both lay and ordained members with considerable experience of the rural church and its setting. It meets monthly. Three times each year it also invites a wider reference group to meet with it to explore ideas and to receive valuable feedback from the wider rural church.

In year one, the coalition strove to understand better some of the challenges being faced in rural communities, to build upon the rural network, published a rural vision document and it nurtured some low-key interventions. These included rural pioneer ministry in former coalfield areas in South East Northumberland and the preparations for a rural Bishop’s Mission Order prioritising community engagement as the context for church growth were carried out in the Glendale area of North Northumberland. (A Bishop’s Mission Order is a special measure to enable fresh expressions of church collaboration to flourish between or across parish boundaries). The first Mission and Ministry Leadership Team was established as a pilot project in the rural west of Morpeth Deanery with a half-stipend shared between a lay and ordained minister.

The early insight from this first pilot, together with research into what other interventions are happening nationally, have helped to crystallise the model for Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams in year 2 and have also helped the Guiding Coalition to link collaborative working with the growth of the church. Also in year 2, and in addition to work that established the theological and practical principles of Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams, foundational work was carried out in some key areas that are seen to be essential to the flourishing of the rural church:

* Parochial and pastoral structures
* Patterns of community Engagement
* Education in rural schools
* Theological Education and Training
* Monitoring & Evaluation of mission and ministry
* Communications & Networking
* Buildings strategy
* Governance of the rural strand
* Case Studies, including pilot studies

We will very soon publish leaflets for PCCs based on these key areas:

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

And further leaflets will follow.

**5. New Ways of Collaborative Working**

The initiative provided through ***growing church bringing hope*** is a fresh opportunity to develop sustainable, appropriate and imaginative models of collaborative ministry, teams, parochial structures and ways of working for the rural church.

We have identified six different ‘leading actions’ or approaches which will establish new forms of ministry in the rural areas of the diocese. Each action is collaborative in its intention and is implemented through a particular tool or intervention. They are:

1. Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams, 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.
3. Leading and growing one church at a time through 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.
5. Growing fresh expressions of church through the deployment of Pioneer Ministers;
6. Setting up intentional minster-based models in market and county towns

As the diocesan strategy was launched, the purpose of the rural strand was framed in terms of team working. We stated: ‘the purpose of the rural strand is to reimagine the rural church through the creation of mission and ministry teams in all these contexts, and to develop structures that will support the newly imagined rural church’. The guiding coalition has come to understand mission and ministry teams in the original statement in generic, collaborative terms and to see a Mission and Ministry Leadership Team as one form of collaborative instrument, tool or model among others.

As we reflected and consulted within the diocese we have realised that a collaborative approach means that it can be more important to create new relationships, even often across traditional boundaries, before we attempt to change structures. We also recognised that the different approaches (see 1-6 above) each represent a collaborative approach that forms new missional and ministerial relationships. In the light of newly formed relationships, new pastoral, parochial and benefice structures will emerge. These will be discerned through the new patterns of mission and ministry that come into being. This articulates what some describe as ‘form following function’ and is a fundamental commitment of the Rural Strand’s work.

The following table shows how the identified ‘leading actions’ are embodied within the various instruments (tools) for collaborative ministry:

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| **Leading actions** | **Instruments** | **Indicative Places** |
| Setting up teams for mission and ministry | Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams | * Upper Wansbeck Parishes * Hadrian’s Wall parishes * Embleton etc and Aln and Coastal Parishes * Norham deanery’s rural parishes * **Chollerton** with Birtley and Throckrington and St Oswald in Lee with Bingfield |
| Focusing on community engagement | Bishop’s Mission Order | Mission Initiative North Northumberland (MINN) – the former Glendale parishes |
| Leading and growing ‘one church at a time’ | Focal Ministers/Leaders | * Falstone * Thorneyburn * Longframlington * **Chollerton** with Birtley and Throckrington and St Oswald in Lee with Bingfield |
| Focusing on developing a strategic approach through buildings | Rural Churches for Everyone | Existing Moorland Group plus Snod’s Edge |
| Growing Fresh Expressions of church | Pioneer Ministers | * Widdrington Station * Lynemouth and Ellington * Cornhill, Carham and Branxton |
| Creating centred teams in market/county towns | Minster-based Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams | * Market/County and other towns |

Church growth is associated with collaborative ministry in general and especially where lay and ordained work in partnership. In more specific terms, it’s important to the Rural Strand that each collaborative model contributes to church growth. The link between church growth is established, for example, in discussions about focal ministers and also in our experience of deploying collaborative models in the diocese such as a Bishop’s Mission Order. The links between different types of collaboration and the different dimensions of church growth – numerical, spiritual and missional – will be tested through the programme of case studies (including pilot studies) which are outlined below.

We envisage that the rural context of Newcastle Diocese will require a mixed economy of models. What is appropriate in one setting will be different from another. No blueprint or pre-determined version of the six instruments of collaborative ministry will be imposed. We recognise that sometimes one collaborative approach may be adopted to break open the ground to enable new ways of working, which will then, in turn, yield to another approach. For example, a buildings focus that creates collaboration might yield in time to a full Mission and Ministry Leadership Team; or one approach might exist alongside another, for example, focal ministry alongside, or as part of, a Mission and Ministry Leadership Team. Our aspiration is for the application of a mixed economy of collaborative tools each contributing to growing and re-imagining the rural church.

As results and findings emerge from the case studies so each of the instruments will be enriched in their practice and theology and may well be adjusted to ensure maximum impact in each setting. New instruments might also emerge, enlarging the mixed economy of collaboration.

NB. We hope and anticipate that significant numbers of lay people in the rural setting will offer to train as Authorised Lay Ministers. This will strengthen each of the six collaborate models outlined above and help to enable the development of mission and ministry through the work of the Rural Strand.

**6. Change Arenas**

Changes to ministerial teams and parochial structures have been a constant within the rural church in response to ever-changing communities, demographics, rural industries and working practices. However, the pace of that change has accelerated in recent times. As a consequence of this, there are currently around 25 areas in the diocese where the rural church is intentionally considering changes to existing models of collaboration and parochial structures. These will enable ministry and mission to be carried out more effectively and growth to be planned and implemented. We have chosen to call these areas ‘change arenas’ to highlight the grass roots passion for church across much of the diocese’s rurality. The ‘change arenas’ have emerged out of the deanery development process implemented in 2010 and in many places are owned as part of a deanery plan.

This is a challenging programme of work, but necessary for the sustainability and growth of the rural parts of the diocese. As we work with each change arena, following a wide range of pathways, the common point of reference is the vision that frames the rural strand and its associated goals.

Each change arena (and this may include more than one parish or benefice – for example, Embleton etc. and the Aln and Coastal parishes: three benefices, six parishes and nine churches at present) will be invited to commit to the vision and goals of the Rural Strand within the framework of the diocesan strategy, and to participate in the creation of a re-imagined rural church by adopting one or more of the collaborative instruments. We will be show clearly which goals within the vision they might be contributing to.

Each relevant deanery will also be invited to commit to support each change arena’s strategy for contributing to the vision of ***growing church bringing hope***. Simple proformas or project sheets are being developed to help each change arena have real clarity as to the goals of the strategic actions. The Rural Strand Guiding Coalition will work with deaneries to oversee each change project and to introduce light touch, but effective project planning in each setting. It is planned that six to eight change projects will be implemented in each year from 2019 to 2022 and to achieve this goal fresh enabling and delivery resource is being sought. In broad terms, this covers what we have described as phase two of the delivery of the diocesan strategy.

**7. Vision and Goals**

The Rural Strand’s vision in the context of the broader diocesan vision is for a **rural church that will become a *growing church bring 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 have discerned that for this vision to be achieved, the rural church will be fulfilling the following objectives. The rural church will be:

1. Worshipping locally and with openness to new patterns of worship, new styles of worship and fresh types of congregations.
2. 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. Regarded by other institutions, communities and individuals as a significant partner/player in the development of local communities.
4. Valued, by itself and others, as sacred space that holds and shares the Christian story and its heritage in Northumberland and beyond.
5. 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.

**8. Case Studies**

As indicated above, 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 the ‘pilot study’, will provide invaluable evidence about what works and why it works. As explained earlier they will also indicate and confirm to the Guiding Coalition how the different instruments of collaboration (in different combinations) 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 are piloted and explored, developing the mixed economy referred to above.

**9. Church Buildings**

The rural strand guiding coalition takes its approach to rural church buildings seriously but advocates a particular approach. In the future it will be vital that there is a rationale for the presence of each church building within the diocese. Each building will require a unique selling point. In other words, we will 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. Buildings are not ‘ends in themselves’ but must serve the wider need of the church. 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.

In order to meet this need a leading-edge project entitled ‘Rural Churches for Everyone’ has just begun. This extends the wider work of the Inspired North East development programme funded since 2010. This new project will enable clusters of parishes and church to work collaboratively at a local level to develop their thinking and planning around their buildings and to grow local capacity to own their buildings and to identify their futures.

Rural Churches for Everyone is a two-year programme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to enable us to work strategically with our rural church buildings. It will work initially with over 40 church buildings in four clusters alongside community partners such as the two AONBs (North Pennines and North Northumberland Coastal), the Northumberland National Park, the Rural Community Council (Community Action Northumberland) and the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University. We have just appointed a lead officer, Elanor Johnson, to manage the project. There will be opportunities to learn from the programme for all rural churches, whether or not they form part of the initial 40.

**10. 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 is networked with over 100 people, lay an 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 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 a 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 and tourism. Each workshop is reported in detail is developing into a key resource for local and contextual rural practical theology. Reports on the workshops will soon be published on a new rural section of the diocesan website.

**11. Questions for Deaneries**

This is the story so far, completing what we have called phase one of our work. As we embark on the next stage of our journey, phase two, some questions for discussion might be:

1. What new initiatives in collaborative ministry are happening where you are?
2. What kind of training or support would help you to foster their effectiveness?
3. How best can the Rural Strand work with you so that you can benefit from initiatives such as Rural Churches for Everyone?
4. How best can the Rural Strand listen to your concerns?

**The Rural Stand Guiding Coalition**

(revised), October 2019