The Rural Church and Sustainable Tourism
Bamburgh, Friday 28 February 2020

This was the fifth Contextual Practice Workshop organised by the Rural Strand of the diocesan strategy: *growing church bringing hope*. It took place in the Pavilion and in St Aidan's Church Bamburgh. The aim was to reflect on the church's relationship with the concept of sustainable tourism and to discover what part the church can play in enabling good tourism that strikes the right balance between the needs of host communities and those of pilgrims, visitors and tourists. The Rural Strand is especially grateful to Revd Louise Taylor-Kenyon, the Vicar of Bamburgh, for hosting the event. It was chaired by the Ven. Peter Robinson, Archdeacon of Lindisfarne.

The Northern Saints Project: The Christian Crossroads of the British Isles. Craig Wilson, Destination Projects Manager, Visit County Durham

This ambitious project seeks to position the North East of England as the 'Christian Crossroads of the British Isles.'

It is a partnership between a broad base of organisations including local authorities and the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle.

It aims to increase the volume of visitors to the region and add value to their stay here. At the heart of this is a belief that the region offers something 'authentic, rooted' and distinctive. And yet we need to identify target markets rather than just make the mistake of thinking that because we've got something good here, all we need to do is to tell people about it. In tourism we do not need just to match expectations but to exceed them!

The project hopes to encourage visitors to see and do more and to convert day visitors to overnight visitors (only 8% of visitors to

Durham City stay overnight – but they contribute 50% of the tourism 'spend'). And yet the project is not just for visitors from outside the region, but it's firmly for north-eastern residents too.

One of its key aims is to develop a wider or broader interpretation of 'pilgrimage'. A classic definition might be: '*A pilgrimage is a journey with purpose and significance. Making a pilgrimage, you are literally walking in the footsteps of history; pilgrimages typically lead to points of historic or spiritual importance and are paths which have been followed by many people over hundreds, if not thousands of years*.' But a wider interpretation of pilgrimage is also needed, not least because people don't operate in a bubble when they go on holiday. They like to do lots of different things. We need to give them choice. Pilgrimage can be focused on almost anything: even the aim of trying to visit every Football League ground in the country!

We need to celebrate the region's considerable religious heritage through 'a consumer focused narrative and storytelling' by means of visitor attractions, cultural and heritage experiences, regional arts, as well as landscapes and destinations such as market towns, village and cities. More generic visitors attracted to heritage, art heritage, architecture, the outdoors, walking, wellbeing and other family-friendly activities make up around 70% of the potential market. Research from the Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain shows that of 300K visits each year, 75% of those who follow that pilgrimage route do so for reasons other than making an explicitly Christian pilgrimage.

All this may embrace not just the explicitly Christian heritage of the region, but includes 'well-being', peace and tranquillity – 'spirituality' in the broadest sense, especially for local people who may have less disposable income post-Brexit if some degree of austerity returns and who may welcome short breaks and family 'days out'. There is a need for places to eat and drink (an audit has been done of places on either side of the routes – with information on a phone app) and visitor accommodation, as part of which, 'champing' presents a particularly attractive proposition for tourists from the USA – they love the idea! One key market may be folk from the American 'Bible Belt'.

The Northern Saints Project (was) due to be launched on 20 March, but the launch is just the first phase and more funding is being sought to follow through on longer-term aims for the project. Even at a simple level, it's important to ensure, for example, that leaflets are kept up to date. The project mustn't be just another flash in the pan. One key aim is to create more viable and sustainable communities, with more viable jobs.

Phase 2 from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021 aims to develop further the trails, to promote them, market them domestically and internationally, raise funds for infrastructure, and expand routes to other parts of the region or neighbouring destinations.

Phase 3 from Spring 2021 to 2030 seeks to develop this further by uniting hundreds of heritage, cultural and tourism 'products' under one 'compelling narrative', with a theme on trend, around peace and tranquillity, escapism, wellbeing and spirituality. It seeks to put the North East on the map nationally and internationally, with an ambition to rival the best international routes: The Christian Crossroads of the British Isles.

Funding so far for the project is mainly from Visit County Durham/Durham County Council (£100K), but it has received widespread support including from the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle. Resources will include a dedicated website (www.northernsaints.com), digital marketing, trail leaflets, press and media coverage and a pilgrim 'passport'.

The Northern Saints Project comprises 6 core routes, all ending in Durham. All of them are based on pre-existing routes and are also connected with other existing routes such as, most importantly, St Cuthbert's Way and St Oswald's Way.

The Angel's Way: from Seaton Sluice, the Angel of the North and Chester-le-Street - 30 miles
The Way of Learning: from Jarrow and Wearmouth – 38 miles
The Way of Life: from Gainsford – 43 miles
The Way of Light: from Hexham, Blanchland and Muggleswick – 45 miles
The Way of Love: from Hartlepool – 28 miles (and may be extended from Whitby)
The Way of Sea: from Amble, Tynemouth and North Shields – approx. 38 miles

In addition:

'Connecting Route 1' links the 46.5 miles between Warkworth and Lindisfarne following England's Coastal path and St Oswald's Way
'Connecting Route 2' links the 50.5 miles between Warkworth and Hexham via Heavenfield (St Oswald's Way).

Discussion Points and Questions

Craig affirmed that once the first main six routes are established there will be ample scope, as the project develops, to develop further links and trails in the region.

There is a recognition that the project needs to be sustainable and that it needs to avoid flooding already busy tourist spots with more visitors. The project is dedicated to adding value not volume *per se* to the tourism profile of the region. The project will help to steer visitors away from over-exposed sites such as Holy Island. It will do this in part by showing sensitivity to issues such as pricing, packaging and parking.

There is a recognition of the value of public transport to enable people to access parts of the routes (few people will attempt each route fully in one visit). The project is working with local transport providers (Go North East and Arriva) to plan this and is also aware of the need to make better use of existing services.

Sustainable Tourism
Jonathan Blackie, Chair of Alnwick Garden Trust

It is a considerable challenge to agree what sustainable tourism means. It carries ethical, value-based assumptions and seeks to reflect upon and enrich our lives.

Background

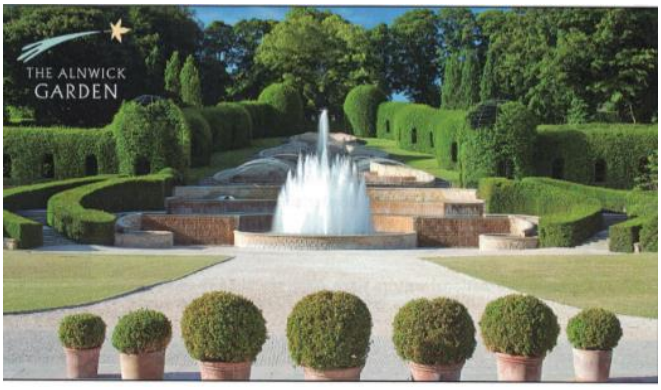
Jonathan (amongst many other things he is the former Regional Director, Government Office North East, Director One North East, Regional Director English Partnerships, and Director Newcastle City Challenge) bought a hotel in Otterburn and then 18 months ago sold it as a going concern. He remembers never being at ease while running the hotel, with a 5.30am start on Sunday mornings to prepare breakfast and always having to face the consequences of Trip Advisor.

As Chair of Governors at St Chad's College Durham he was struck by how many visitors were choir groups from the USA. The opportunity to perform in Durham Cathedral represented, for them, the pinnacle of their life. They very much wanted to sing in churches.

One consequence of the debate on Scottish independence and the 'no' vote to independence in 2014 has been the reawakening of interest in greater collaboration between the five local councils on either side of the Anglo-Scottish border. As a major contribution to this, Jonathan wrote a report: 'Rethinking Economic Development in the Borderlands.' This led to the setting up of the Borderlands Initiative, which has a resource of over £350 million and which links five local authorities: Dumfries and Galloway, Scottish Borders, Carlisle City Council, Cumbria and Northumberland.

The Alnwick Garden – A Case Study

Alnwick Garden is 15 years old and receives 350,000 visitors each year. The first lesson learned was that there is a tremendous surge in visitors when a major attraction first opens. People come out of curiosity. At Alnwick, numbers dropped from half a million *per annum* at the beginning down to a quarter of a million. In response, numbers have to be attracted by planning ahead.



The climate in Northumberland makes a year-round offer difficult, but a seasonal cycle of events can be offered to supplement a peak in revenue in July and August (at Alnwick back in 2014 this represented up to 60% of the annual total). For example, an Easter-time, Cherry Blossom event (somewhat

weather dependent) increased footfall by 33%. During the peak summer season popular events can raise visitor numbers by about 20%, but this can make the venue too busy. People are put off if they have to queue to get in. It is important to learn the maximum capacity for a venue. At Alnwick Garden this is around 5,000 people/day. A Halloween event, which included a lantern procession into the town attracted 3,000 people, many of them locals. At Christmas when the short hours of daylight make for real difficulties the appearance of Santa in the Garden makes all the difference. In January and February when the weather can be bleak it has proven wise to close the venue to allow maintenance to take place – and to plan ahead, including, for example, a fairy-tale element into the garden and a village for children.

Tourism in Northumberland

There are times when Northumberland is full, which presents a challenge, especially for local residents. We need to learn from good practice (Iceland) and from where things have gone wrong (e.g. Windermere when there's sometimes an 800m queue for the ferry made up of lots of foreign visitors bused up via Manchester). We have to think creatively about capacity and where and what we want to encourage folk to visit. For examples, locals may wish to protect some cultural events as 'theirs' and not as an opportunity for tourism. This sensitivity shows that the process of how those promoting tourism engage with local communities can be quite complex.

Tourism, however, makes a very significant contribution to the economy of Northumberland. In Bamburgh and Holy Island it accounts for over 50% of the income. And the growth of the numbers of international tourists is also significant because they spend far more than UK visitor, for example, from the high value USA market, whose citizens each spend around £1K when they visit the North East as tourists. Even so, the profile of our region is still all but non-existent in some key potential markets, including the USA.

We need to invest in order to attract such business and especially online. We also have to overcome the complexity of governmental structures that result in a lack of clarity about who's responsible for what. The new North of Tyne combined authority should have a clear role to play in helping to resolve this. Newcastle City has shown the way forward with new hotels and a proven ability to stage big events such as the Great North Run. A strategic view is needed of three places with key assets to attract visitors: Newcastle City, Durham City and Northumberland.

So what type of tourism should we be looking to focus on and develop? Along with international visitors, the Third Age sector is potentially a very significant target market in that it is mobile and able to afford a little more than other groups. It is also prepared to travel outside peak periods. Despite austerity new attractions in the region such as The Sill and the redeveloped Corbridge Roman Museum help to build an attractive offer.

Why is Christian heritage an important ingredient?

The Lindisfarne Gospels, when exhibited in Durham in 2013, showed what a blockbuster event Christian heritage can provide and stimulate. The Gospels are due back in the North in 2023 and there is already competition around where to host them.

There is a need to discuss what Christianity might offer to sustainable tourism. Unlocked churches would be a good starting point? One question we need to answer is, 'How would you want to be received yourself?' Perhaps we can learn from a pilgrimage route in Western Sweden which includes as a major element, an opportunity to meet the locals. It's possible to register online to meet a local guide or simply to meet over a coffee and learn a little of the local story.

Discussion Points and Questions

We need to exercise a Christian hospitality to visitors that's open and welcoming to enable sustainable tourism to thrive. Encounters with tourists through personal hospitality can be mutually enriching. We need to examine and assess the resources we already have.

There are some big stories to tell in and through some of our churches and churchyards. We are memory keepers. We need to relate more of the human stories too (conversation in the Alnwick garden with the gardeners is something that a lot of visitors value greatly). The community has a sense of ownership in churchyards that doesn't always quite extend in the same way to the churches themselves – a different dynamic is at play. We should offer churchyard tours.

Christianity ought to be (and can be) a pointer to sustainability linked to our beliefs about creation and the need to care for it. Can climate change be a new stimulus for art?

We offer a free, quiet and peaceful space, a sense of calm and of history, which is, perhaps, a precious alternative to the culture of 'doing' that characterises a lot of tourism. Churchyards are also a green space.

Some small isolated rural churches find it difficult to offer a ministry to tourists if there isn't the infrastructure of support to back this up in small congregations and scattered communities; and it takes time for communities to understand what they have to offer and its potential. Churches in multi-parish benefices need to co-operate in this, learn and support one another and not just with one another in the benefice, but with other nearby churches.

Churches can be wonderful spaces for events. We need to think imaginatively about the possibilities as well as reclaiming our role as venues for weddings.

And people need toilets!

Accessing Aidan
Jessica Turner, Accessing Aidan Project Officer, Northumberland Coast AONB

The AONB knows a lot about those who visit the coast. 91% of tourists come by car, filling the car parks to capacity and beyond; but more car parks would only serve to ruin the experience for everyone. In promoting tourism – the essential background to the Accessing Aidan Project – a careful balancing act was needed.

Charnel

Charnel is loose bone, usually housed in an ossuary, to create space in consecrated ground, especially when graves were not marked (a practice that didn't start widely in Britain until the start of the seventeenth century). It was argued that once a body was de-fleshed the soul had departed and it was therefore acceptable to move the bones. With the definition of Purgatory by Pope Innocent IV in 1254 as a kind of celestial waiting room, it was also thought that prayer might help to speed up the journey through Purgatory. Prayer could be paid for. In 1537 the practice of charnelling in England stopped with the dissolution of the monasteries and yet over 400 Post-Reformation ossuaries remained in Britain, and two intact medieval examples still survive at Hythe in Kent and Rothwell in Northants.

Why make an Ossuary in Bamburgh?

The story begins with a rumour of a Viking burial ground in the dunes. On the First Edition OS map of Bamburgh (around 1860?) an 'Old Danish Burial Ground' is marked, said to have been revealed in the great storms of 1816-7. Brian Hope-Taylor of Cambridge University attempted to locate the burial ground in the 1960s but failed to find anything, but between 1999 and 2007 the Bamburgh Research Project, working with Durham University found a series of East-West orientated inhumations at the Bowl Hole, 300 metres south of Bamburgh Castle. With no associated grave goods they appeared to be Christian. Radiocarbon C14 dating of bone fragments indicated a date between 650-800CE, which is earlier and rather more interesting than a Viking burial ground might have been. Was this the remains of Aidan's congregation?

The remains of over 120 people were recovered, though there may be many more, perhaps 800 more graves on the site. Re-burial on site was not allowed because it is a site of Special Scientific Interest. Canon Brian Hurst, the then Vicar of Bamburgh suggested that they be laid to rest in the crypt below the chancel of the parish church, in fact in a second smaller crypt with an earth floor that could be separated from the main crypt. This was done in 2016 with an iron-work screen in the

form of an Anglo-Saxon knot made by fourth-generation family blacksmith Stephen Lunn at Red Row.

Ossuary boxes large enough to each accommodate a skill and femurs were bought from Italy (they aren't readily available in a B&Q!). Brian Hurst conducted a re-burial ceremony with the remains brought to the church in a horse-drawn carriage (organised by 'Go as you Please' Funeral Directors!) and met by a full church. On the day after the Brexit vote, as the sun came out after a storm, and as we turned our backs on Europe, it was a day of strong and conflicted emotions. Old English was used for part of the ceremony, the language that the people would have known. The gate was then locked. It will not be opened again. This is their final resting place.

What do we know about the people whose remains were found?

Analysis of stable isotopes (of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen and strontium) in the teeth of whose remains were excavated revealed tell-tale traces of their diet and also of the clear geographical origins of where they grew up. Around half were relatively local, while others came from much further afield including North Africa, Scandinavia (with distinctively crouched burials – Christian burial practices were fluid and allowed for some earlier customs to continue), Italy, the South of France, Southern Spain and Ireland. As a group they seemed to be healthy, robust and well fed. There was little incidence of poor teeth. With a good diet, they seemed to be of high status, very possibly members of the court of King Oswald.

It was even possible to suggest some of their occupations, for example one woman's front teeth showed wear typical of a weaver. One of the Scandinavian skeletons was of a man over 65 years old, perhaps a trader. A few skeletons were of children. One, aged about 9 or 10, still with some milk teeth, suggest that she may have been born in North Africa or Southern Spain, but spent a childhood in the South of France before travelling to Bamburgh. All this shows that whether the reasons for travel were socio-economic or religious people were coming to Northumbria from all over Europe. Migration is nothing new. Different cultures have long learned to live and work together – a lesson we still need to take to heart. Perhaps it was the kindness and gentleness of Aidan that helped to lead them all here.

Unusually one skeleton showed signs of severe weapon trauma, a young man of around 21 had suffered a catastrophic, probably single, sword blow from his shoulder to his pelvis, even down to a nick in his patella.

One skeleton was of an individual aged about 50. Isotopic analysis revealed that he had come from Iona. Was he a friend of Oswald and Aidan? He would surely have known them personally – a fantastic and deeply moving link.

The Interpretation of the story of the human remains is free, but of as high a quality as possible, as the story merits.

A visitor survey in Bamburgh car park showed that less than 10% of visitors knew there was a church in the village. Despite this, there are no large and obvious signs to the church or a footpath to the crypt. The crypt has been kept simple and subtle with a short 4 minute film projected onto the wall. Interpretation boards in the church (itself an amazing teaching resource) and touch screens there provide information on the contents of all the ossuary boxes. There's also a specially made automaton to enjoy. The aim in all this was to provide appeal across the market. Other educational projects have included creative writing for boys: CSI (crime scene investigation) on the 21-year-old killed by the vicious sword blow and Maud the skeleton – an osteology exercise for kids.

The Church and Sustainable Tourism – A Theological Reflection
Andrew Duff, formerly of Northumbria Tourist Board, Visit Britain and Inspired North East

What are the implications of projects like the Northern Saints Trails and Accessing Aidan and what are the opportunities for seeing God at work in all this?

Tourism represents a growth market for our region. Both Durham and Northumberland tourism organisations are influenced by the need for sustainable tourism which is in turn favourable to the churches and sacred places. There is thus a trend towards 'slow tourism' linked to mindfulness and self-discovery and a search for authenticity and the unspoiled.

Pilgrimage is the original form of tourism – the idea of leaving home, taking time out and for some, a chance to consider the direction of their life: their priorities or an opportunity to come to terms with a loss. The Dean of Santiago Cathedral, Segundo Leonardo Pérez López, said, 'the modern person remains a religious or spiritual being, needing times of solitude and silence in life to discover oneself.'

God is at work in the 'wild places – landscape, dark skies and so on. This echoes the biblical tradition of spiritual encounters in wild places, for example Elijah's experience at a time of personal crisis, when he found God not in great wind, earthquake and fire but in 'the sound of sheer silence' – the 'still, small voice' of God. This led Elijah to a change of direction. Are life-changing decisions made now whilst on holiday? Our landscapes provide aesthetic pleasure, a renewed connection with nature and a space to engage with the spiritual inner self to allow for a sense of awe and divine presence. How might our churches engage with such opportunities?

God is at work in 'sacred' places. Our churches and churchyards are precious to us and loaded with many levels of meaning. They are first and foremost places of worship, imbued with a sense of the holy, formed by practices and prayer over many centuries that still continue. But for those who are not now used to religious experiences and symbolic language they are also 'places of strangeness'. Churches are often visited as heritage sites rather than religious places and as such, visitors expect to be treated as guests rather than as believers/religious practitioners. This is a challenge. How should churches respond?

But visitors make an impact: they impose assumptions about a site and demand ease of access, car parking facilities, toilets and so on. All this risks reducing the transcendence of the experience. Religious tourism can also become commercialised, for example with painted pebbles, fridge magnets etc., but people do like to buy something to take away. How can we protect the authenticity of sacred sites as places of 'sanctuary', of living culture and of spiritual heritage?

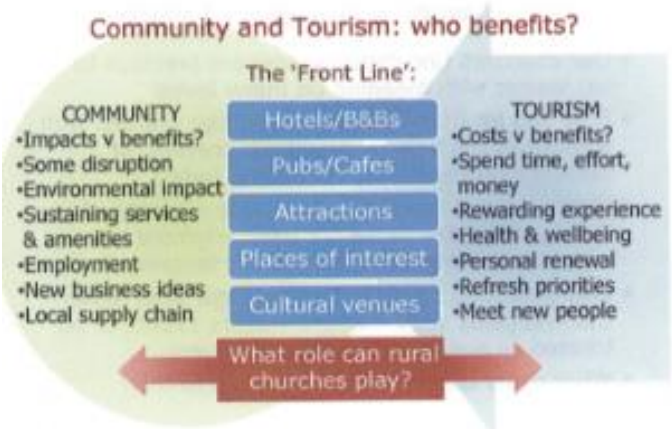
God is at work in the stories of people and places. Tourists don't need a sacred narrative in order to justify a journey, but such narratives can enhance their experience. The stories of the saints are 'embedded' in our land and local churches are often the oldest building in a locality that is open to the public. As such they are 'story boxes', and through their layout, furniture fittings and windows etc. they provide signs and symbols of our Christian storey and thus offer evidence of the people and events that helped to shape our communities. Sometimes, however, this rich layer of meaning is 'hidden in plain sight' if, for example, the story told by a picture in a window is not self-evident. A great deal of symbolism in church architecture was understood through a cultural context, a language that is inaccessible to much of today's audience. Is there then scope to tell our stories in fresh ways that will engage the interest of visitors? How might we communicate the stories of God's good news in ways that will connect with the needs and yearnings of our 21st Century visitors? Jesus said, *'I tell you if these [disciples] were silent, the very stones would cry out'* (Luke 19:40).

God is at work in welcome and hospitality.
Be hospitable to one another without grudging. 1 Peter 4:9. Hebrews 13: 2 goes further: *Show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it*.
Many churches now offer visitor information, refreshments, access to a toilet and evidence of the building being valued and used by the community. Festivals and events in churches provide further opportunities to engage with people. God's love is shown just by being open and welcoming, offering hospitality as well as by creatively telling our story.

In a survey of 100 individuals conducted by Professor Myra Shackley, (Centre for Tourism and Visitor Management Nottingham Trent University), the ten most important factors affecting visitors to church buildings were as follows:

- welcome (54%)
- holiness (24%)
- church loved and used (23%)
- notice boards and information (23%)
- temperature (21%)
- smell (18%)
- architecture (15%)
- music (14%)
- flowers (12%)
- light (12%)

God is at work in sustainable communities.
There is a need to renew our 'pride of place.' *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places, I have a goodly heritage.* Psalm 16:6.
Local people identify with sacred sites, which in turn engender a sense of ownership. Such sites are a significant local resource. Rural churches can play a role in promoting 'localism' through the use of locally-sourced and sustainable products, traditional skills and so on. This helps to maximise



the local 'multiplier' effect. When visitors are connected to the local community value is given and received through that transaction.

Rural churches are contributing to the growth of tourism. We are the most spread-out visitor resource in the community. There is an interconnection between:

- Growth of Tourism in the North East
- Welcoming visitors to out sacred spaces
- Hospitality and community as aspects of mission
- Sharing our story, engaging with people

The USP of 'Religious Heritage Tourism' is:

- Rooted in the community
- Alive and in use
- Connected to people
- Sustainable

Crispin Truman, ex CEO, Churches Conservation Trust.

Closing thoughts

The children in C.S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian* explore the place they've been taken to: *'Have none of you guessed where we are?' said Peter. 'Go on, go on', said Lucy, 'I've felt for hours that there was some wonderful mystery hanging over this place. We are in the ruins of Cair Paravel itself,' said Peter.*

The place may have a powerful significance, but it is God's purposes that must be made visible and tangible. When we say, 'I'm in charge of these ruins' (i.e. church or sacred site) it must mean we are Guardians of a vision, not curators for the department of ancient monuments. Celtic Daily Prayer, notes, 8 July.

Discussion Points

How might the churches respond to:

- The growth of tourism and the Northern Saints Trails, in particular?
- The potential therapeutic, sacred qualities of our landscapes?
- Visitors' search for mindfulness, self-discovery and authenticity?
- Being open and welcoming by offering hospitality, telling our stories creatively and thus sharing God's love?
- Connecting visitors with the community – giving and receiving value?

Group Discussion – Points we want to take away

- Authenticity is so important. We need to have the courage to believe in what we've already got.

- Knowing our own story is a way of linking to other stories in the community and may help us to discover the unique specialness of what we've got.

- To meet a local person in a small rural church (if it's open) represents a happy accident on any day if worship isn't taking place. What substitute can we find when it's hard to maintain a human presence in each building in the hope of welcoming visitors? Can social media help?

- How we tell a story really matters (even leaflets help), and we have to recognise that having someone on hand to greet visitors is not always helpful. Some people like empty churches!

- Can a soft, first contact point with churches be an important stage in fostering an evolving relationship with people?

- The landscape has a sacred quality (think of Mount Joy in Durham and of Montjoie in Vézeley in Burgundy). Might we use the view looking out *from* the church door in our publicity?

- Little touches matter – just to see fresh flowers in a church is very important.

- Local partnerships matter and need to be built – for example, with local organisations and hotels.

- While it is good to do all that we can welcome tourists to our churches and holy places, we mustn't forget our 'locals.' We must take care to reach out to them and welcome them too – as well as to visitors.

- Our main focus is for the people we live amongst. Should we be talking about the role of holiday homes and a tourist tax?

- And there is a need to engage the local community with tourism issues.

- The economics of tourism is an important issue we need to address. Much employment is seasonal and wages can be low. Sustainability has to reach out to every level of the economic ladder. Benefits do not inevitably trickle down to everyone.

- There are examples of good practice that need to be applauded – for example Matfen Hall.

- Churches need to recognise that they must address some real challenges to participate in tourism effectively. Again, we need to learn from good practice. St Aidan's Bamburgh is a revelation. It is inviting and hospitable.

- It's not always about getting more people to come to places like Bamburgh, but about ensuring that when people come they understand it better.

- People who come need an enriched experience.

- Childrens' trails can help. Visiting a church a church with a young family can be difficult.

- Do our churches do enough to address our cultural norms and needs?

Addendum

Thank you, Peter!

Without Peter Robinson's drive, wisdom, deep knowledge of the region and passionate desire that the Rural Strand of *growing church bringing hope* represents an invaluable opportunity for the church to engage in new and exciting ways with the rural communities of the North East, this and the four preceding 'Contextual Practice Workshops' (Peter invented the term) would not have taken place – and we would all have been much the poorer.

It will be hard to imagine the Rural Strand without Peter, and we will miss him very much, but we wish him every blessing in his new and challenging role as Dean of Derby.

Thank you, Peter, for all that you have done as a fine and stalwart champion of the rural church, nationally and especially in the Diocese of Newcastle. You will always be part of us.

The Rural Church, Sustainable Tourism and the 'New Normal'

When we held our 'contextual workshop' in Bamburgh on 28 February we did not discuss the likely impact of Covid-19 on our topic – the rural church and sustainable tourism. There were then just twenty confirmed cases of Cov-19 in the UK and although its spread was already beginning to dominate the headlines, and there was the start of talk about possible closures of schools and the cancellation of large sporting events, it was still widely perceived as someone else's problem. What a difference ten weeks makes!

On 31 March Visit Scotland published the result of a survey of 2,243 businesses carried out over the previous 10 days. The outlook was gloomy. Most businesses across hotel/B&B/guest houses; activities and attractions and food, drink and retail, and across all sizes of business, estimated that without support they would not survive for more than three months. Those who responded to the survey almost universally dismissed the idea of loans, even interest free, because with the cancellation of the peak holiday season of 2020, the prospect of not receiving any income until March 2021 would leave them unable to repay.

On 20 March the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak announced the setting up of a job retention ('furlough') scheme, which on 17 April was extended to the end of June, and then again on 13 May until the end of July, and in a more limited form until the end of October, but there can no guarantee that this can continue indefinitely. Limited grant funding to businesses was announced on 3 April. Village halls and other small businesses have benefitted from this, but the impact is limited on the tourism industry more widely.

On 27 April the Guardian newspaper reported that 'tourism hotspots could face the worst of post-lockdown job losses', with a possible 33% overall reduction of employment. The hardest hit were likely to be those aged 16 to 24. 80% of employees in hotel and food sectors were furloughed and 68% in arts and recreation. Visit Britain estimated that the cost to the UK tourism industry in 2020 alone would amount to £15bn, with 22 million fewer visitors. The NewcastleGateshead Initiative estimates that the North East visitor economy alone will lose up to £3bn this year if lockdown continues into the summer months.[1]

Another phenomenon of the pandemic has been a sudden drop in donations to charities, including to the churches which also depend on the use of their buildings to maintain income. Even in the United States, church leaders have agreed that whatever form the 'new normal' takes, the churches, if indeed they survive, will not be the same after Coronavirus.

One key reason for this decline, anxiety apart, is that household incomes have been hit. According to a joint report by Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy and Rural Enterprise UK published on 20 April, Covid-19 is 'impacting household incomes and rural businesses in every sector within our diverse rural economies, as well as charitable and community organisations. Some of these impacts will also be medium or long-term.'[2] They also point out the knock-on effect of this on visitor economies to many rural areas.

Most analysts agree that whenever and however the lockdown is lifted, travel and tourism will take a long time to recover. Tom Burridge, BBC Travel Correspondent wrote on 30 April that there are likely to be fewer flights and higher prices. Not all airlines will survive and restrictions at airports and the need for social distancing at all times is likely to mean that international travel will be for the few not the many. This will have two effects on the local economy: few, if any of the high-spending overseas visitors will come to the region but more local visitors will have little alternative but to

holiday closer to home. The big question that cannot yet be answered is, what level of service will they find? What will they do and who will feed, lodge and entertain them?

Rural societies in turn may, at first at least, feel very nervous about an influx of visitors, especially from the urban North East. The infection rate of Covid-19 has risen markedly in the North East, especially in poorer parts of the region. On 4 May Public Health England figures were reported to show that the North East overtook London as the region with the highest rates of Coronavirus infection in the country. In other parts of the country, but even here in the North East, there has been evidence of growing hostility to second home owners, as there was also towards those who broke regulations to flood to beauty spots in the early stages of the lockdown. The latest trends in the spread of the pandemic are not likely to assuage those fears quickly.

One brighter consequence of the adoption of a new normal may be that there will be a limited flowering of the local arts scene - an idea suggested both by Will Gompertz, BBC Arts Editor and also by Richard Morrison, the chief music critic of The Times. If so, church buildings may be well placed to allow low-cost venues with adequate space for social distancing, but before then we will have to figure out how we are going to unlock them and use them in any way at all. If a ban on larger gatherings means that church buildings remain off-limits we will have to wait longer before we can begin to re-engage with the first tentative visitors to the countryside.

In the longer term, if we can survive and find a way of weathering the next couple of very difficult years, the churches may once again be in a position, arguably an even stronger position, to pick up the threads explored on 28 February in Bamburgh, with an even stronger emphasis on the significance of local partnerships and on the need to serve the needs of local communities and nearby populations. The quality of the stories we tell, the appropriateness of the welcome we offer and the warmth by which we do it all will be more important than ever. Initiatives such as the diocese's Rural Churches for Everyone Project, once it can begin work again, may be able to help communities be better equipped to do this.

The way in which the churches have already responded in taking a lead in the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic has helped to regain us a position of trust, one which we will need to respect and nurture; and we will need to continue to work with partners to re-build a local economy that will need support for a long time. Our allies must be local food producers, farmers and retailers as well as a hospitality industry that will struggle to get back onto its feet.

All this will certainly not be the future we envisaged back in February, but it may be greener, more local, friendlier (once the nervousness born of social distancing is overcome), make more imaginative use of social media and electronic communications and ultimately be more truly sustainable.

Helen Savage
Vicar of the Moorland Group of Parishes.

[1] https://www.ngi.org.uk/resources/news/economic-impact-on-north-easts-tourism-sector-revealed/
[2] https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/centreforruraleconomy/files/researchreports/CRE-briefing-Covid19-and-rural-economies.pdf