

Renewing Rural Mission

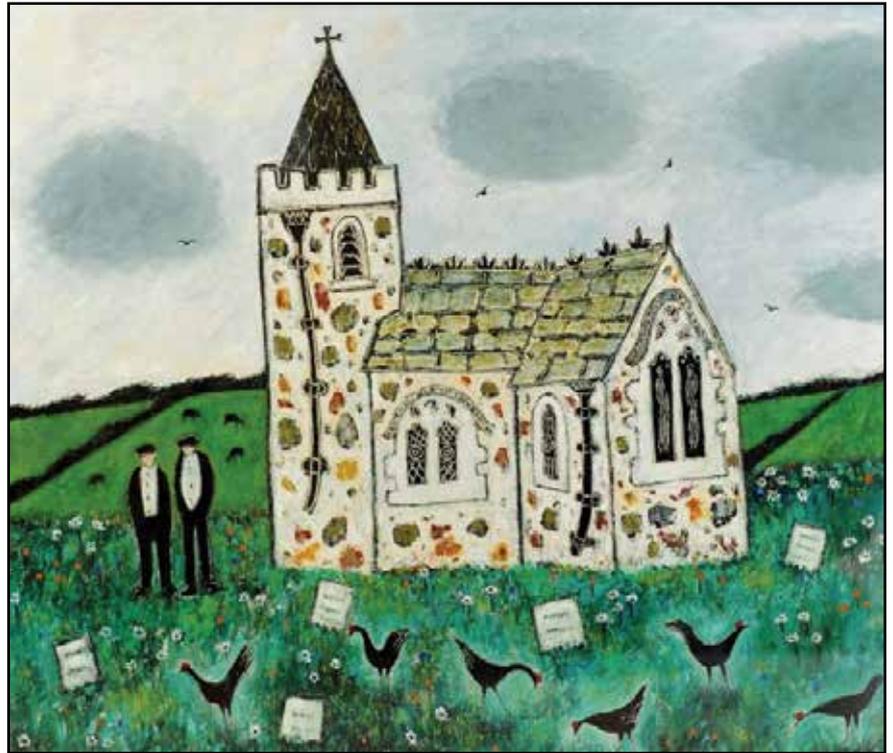
Rural ministry calls us back to the simple model of building relationships, opening up our homes, being faithful in prayer and service and having the courage to talk about Jesus and what he has done for us

Anna Norman-Walker writes

As I settled down to write, the phone rang. It was a priest colleague who ministers in six rural parishes and she wanted to let me know that she had decided to resign. Highly motivated, committed to renewal and in her first incumbency, she simply could not continue as the curator of ancient leaky buildings and a sponge to absorb the anxiety, anger and fear of a dwindling, elderly group of people whose militant localism and resistance to change is suffocating any hope of creative mission. Her lament was simply this 'I wasn't called to this'. The tragedy is that she is the second resignation in the last few months and I fear that this is just the beginning.

He arrived at church for his third service of the day to discover that only he, the organist and one other person were present.

Steve, a vicar of nine rural parishes, described to me recently how he arrived at church for his third service of the day to discover that only he, the organist and one other person were present. 'Oh don't bother with the service just for me' the one member of the congregation said 'I only came because I was down to read the lesson'. Another, a Diocesan Officer, went to take services in two different villages in a rural benefice



About the Picture: 'Church with Chickens' painted by Joan Gilchrest (1918 to 2008) who lived most of her life in Cornwall. Much underrated by the critics if not by the public who loved her instantly recognizable naïve style, she was the niece of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, architect of Liverpool Cathedral.

last Sunday and the same five people were the congregation at both. One woman changed her coat and hat for the second service in the hope that he wouldn't notice! They admitted to him that they didn't want 'The Diocese' to know they were in such dire straits.

We are a people of death and resurrection and so need to be honest about what needs to be allowed to die, so that new life can come.

Perhaps I am the wrong person to write an article on 'resourcing renewal in the rural church' but after ten years of ministry in Devon I have learnt an important truth about renewal and the Christian narrative: Do not fear death; without it, there can be no resurrection. The hospice movement has taught us a very important lesson; that it is life giving to enable people to die with honesty and dignity. I worked as a nurse before ordination and have witnessed death coming to people in many different ways. I learnt very early on that there is such a thing as a good death, where goodbyes are said, where people are given the time to accept, grieve and come to terms with their situation and where they are treated with great respect as they

let go and are let go of.

We are a people of death and resurrection and so need to be honest about what needs to be allowed to die, so that new life can come. For many of us in rural ministry, our task is to be the 'hospice nurse' to some of our church structures and way of doing things and honour them with a dignified end, understanding that this is mission.

I believe this is particularly true of rural dwellers, who regard the village church a little like the Fire Station; they are very glad it is there . . .

The Times religious affairs correspondent in 1985 wrote 'The Rural Church faces extinction in next 20 years'. Of course he was wrong; we soldier on, but with around 150 churches in Devon attracting less than ten worshippers on a Sunday and at an average age of 67, it would seem that the writing is on the wall. Or is it? I have concluded that in terms of the battle for weekly worship in every village, maintenance of buildings and sustaining stipendiary ministry it probably is, short of an unprecedented revival!

continued on page 8 >>



continued from page 5

However as far as the life of faith and the opportunities for the proclamation of the Gospel joining with the mission of God are concerned, it is far from over. If faithful ministers of the Gospel (both lay and ordained) can be released to put their gifts and energies to these things then we may indeed experience rural revival.

There is hope. The sociologist and theologian Grace Davie coined the term 'vicarious religion' to describe the Christian affiliation of much of the UK. I believe this is particularly true of rural dwellers, who regard the village church a little like the Fire Station; they are very glad it is there, will call upon its services in an emergency, but they have no intention of turning up on a weekly basis to thank God for its existence!

I was consistently moved by the levels of trusting faith, (albeit often curiously articulated) among those whom I encountered through the churches' thriving ministry of occasional offices and festival services.

The mistake, I believe, is to associate 'vicarious religion' with hypocrisy. Assuming, rather cynically, that on the occasions when the 'locals' do look to the church, they are doing so for the wrong reasons. The writer of Ecclesiastes said 'God has put eternity in the hearts of people' and Jesus invited his followers to look at the fields, which were 'ripe for harvest'. As vicar of four rural parishes I was consistently moved by the levels of trusting faith, (albeit often curiously articulated) among those whom I encountered through the churches thriving ministry of occasional offices and festival services.



Anna Norman-Walker with Harry at his Baptism

These occasions present us with critical opportunities to share the hope to be found in Christ, but we need to up our game and use them creatively and in ways that actually connect with where people are. I constantly hear of ways in which churches are responding creatively to these occasions.

One church in our Diocese decided to make the most of Harvest Festival and open it up to the whole community in a way they would relate to. It was at significant personal cost to the regular church members; foregoing their communion service for something more accessible and stepping aside to let others take a lead. The Vicar's email said it all:

'I had a slightly sleepless night worrying if anyone would come to our community harvest. 250 people came – of all ages including lots of children. The local nursery children sang, some of the school children had also helped to decorate the church. We had little displays around the church from local makers and producers – the tannery, the winery, the local fabric shop, the ceramics factory, the garden shop. All through the service we had 200 pasties being kept warm in hot cupboards (amazing smell!) and after the blessing they were brought out on trays together with glasses of beer/apple juice. Apple cake followed that. Almost everyone stayed for the food and as they left we gave them a bookmark made and printed to mark the occasion. The main thing was I could tell 250 people that God loved them and would still be with them as they left

the church. Just one example of the opportunities our seasonal festivals offer.'

Creating spaces for people to make sense of life's journey is also a key opportunity for us. One village church invited all those in the Benefice who had experienced bereavement that year to a special 'Night to Remember' at All Souls. Writing to every family a personal letter and advertising it through the village magazines it was a test of faith as to whether anyone would come. The church was bursting at the seams but the thing that really took the regular members by surprise was that when an invitation to come and kneel at the altar rail and receive a prayer for personal healing was given, every single person present quietly queued up to be prayed for. Hands were laid on and these words were prayed:

May God who brought you to birth, and in whose arms you will die contain and comfort you with His love, give you hope in times of confusion, healing in times of sadness and grace to live each day in the light of his renewing presence. Amen.

Tears flowed as people encountered God's presence and his hand of comfort.

People come to faith in Christ one by one and it is always the story of a personal invitation, of a friendship or an act of kindness that new Christians attribute to their story. Rural ministry calls us back to the simple model of building relationship, opening up our homes,

'The opportunity to to nurture community has never been greater'

being faithful in prayer and service and having the courage to talk about Jesus and what he has done for us.

When we gather with others, begin to listen to what our communities are saying and respond to what we hear, there is no limit to what God can and will do as we build a Christ-centred community. At a time when we are told that 70% of the UK population do not know the name of their next door neighbour, the opportunity to nurture community has never been greater.

I am seeing this happening in wonderful and creative ways in rural Devon. This month alone I have been a guest speaker at two pub nights and present on a 'question time' panel in a converted barn. As a Diocese we have launched our first Parish Nursing Scheme in an area where the

local community health care team are struggling for resources. We have a chaplaincy team present at a Farmers Market, just being there for local people in the rural community and supporting its economy. We have Messy Churches popping up faster than we can register them! Three years ago we had 11 in Devon we now have 80 plus (and these are just the ones we know about!). The key question we are asking is how we can nurture both the sense of community that Messy Church has given birth to and help people of all ages along in the faith journey.

I am not convinced that fancy strategies for 'fresh expressions' or any amount of resuscitation will revive the Church in the countryside. We need to let some things die. We need

to set ourselves free from the energy sapping activity of endless rotas to keep the 'Sunday show' on the road and we need desperately to get out of our comfort zone and simply get to know our neighbours.

'God has set eternity in the hearts of people' perhaps our task is to help people make sense of it. 

about the writer

The Revd Canon Anna Norman-Walker Formerly a nurse and having spent time working in youth work and evangelism as a lay person in Guildford, she moved to Devon with her family after her ordination in 2002. Having served as a Curate at St Andrew's, Cullompton and as Priest in Charge of the Culm Valley Mission Community (four parishes, six churches), Anna also served the Exeter Archdeaconry as a Mission Enabler and as a Rural Dean. She was appointed as Diocesan Missioner in November 2010 and installed as Canon Missioner at Exeter Cathedral in January 2011.