

Reflections on the Rural Church Feedback from Consultation Groups (2015)

A. Executive Summary

A significant proportion, 43%, of the parishes of the Church of Scotland are classified as rural. It has been identified that within these communities there are opportunities and challenges which are specific to the rural context. It has long been recognised that there was a need to provide an evidence base about these opportunities and challenges in order to effectively resource and inspire our rural congregations. In response, the Rural¹ Working Group (RWG), operating within the Mission and Discipleship Council (MDC) of the Church of Scotland (CoS), recently engaged in a nationwide consultation process.

The key findings from the consultation process were that:

- There are many instances where rural congregations are still seen to play a positive and central role in their community, and this represents a significant missional opportunity in which they must be supported to nurture and develop.
- There are significant challenges being faced by rural congregations such as: a poverty of resources (both financial and personnel to take on key office bearer roles); large and/or remote geographical locations which are difficult to cover, can create issues of isolation and experience significant population shifts; and detrimental policy, e.g. large multiple linkages which produce logistical issues.
- There are clearly identifiable responses which, if backed with appropriate money and personnel resources, could enable rural congregations to thrive, namely: honing the training and support provision for rural congregations; streamlining areas of governance that take into account the contextual difference experienced by rural congregations; encouraging congregations to collaborate freely within and beyond existing parish and presbytery boundaries; implementing a strategic approach, such as in vocation to rural ministry, utilising national resourcing and encouraging a general cross church approach to the rural context; and putting in place a Rural Areas Committee as part of Mission and Discipleship Council that can adequately support rural charges

B. Background

The RWG has the following remit from the MDC:

- Identify and raise the profile of the needs of rural congregations and presbyteries
- Identify and enable engagement with the ministry and missional opportunities found in rural areas
- Identify and signpost specific rural resources
- Facilitate involvement with and arrangement of regional and or national events with a rural focus
- Provide advice on specific queries directed to the MDC on rural issues
- Liaise with the Scottish Churches Rural Group ACTS to ensure appropriate ecumenical co-operation

The RWG has representatives from Mission & Discipleship Council, co-opted members from rural congregations, CARTA and Social Care Council.

A recent analysis revealed that there are presently 1342 parishes within the Church of Scotland of which 581 are identified as rural. Of these 309 are classified as accessible rural² and 272 as remote rural³. Hence, 43% of the parishes of the Church of Scotland are classified as rural.

As part of the deliverance of MDC from the 2015 General Assembly the following instruction was approved:

- Instruct the Council to develop its engagement with the rural church and bring to the General Assembly of 2016 a report detailing how it will help to resource the rural church to thrive, including the consideration of a rural development worker.

As detailed in the document: 'Scottish Government Urban/Rural Classification 2013 – 2014' published in November 2014 by the Scottish Government Geographic Information Science & Analysis Team (GI-SAT), Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services Division:

¹ Rural is defined as settlements with a population of less than 3,000 people.

² 'Accessible Rural' is defined as a parish with settlements of less than 3,000 people and with a less than 30 minute drive to a settlement with a population of 10,000 or more.

³ 'Remote Rural' is defined as a parish with settlements less than 3,000 people and with a drive time of over 30 minutes to a settlement with a population of 10,000 or more.

The group realised that to fulfil the instruction of the General Assembly and meet its remit it needed to undergo an in-depth consultation process with the rural church to better understand the context and to allow evidence-based recommendations to be made. This report describes the consultation process, the key findings and the proposals arising from that work.

C. Consultation Process

Aim of the consultation:

To provide an evidence base from which the RWG could report to the 2016 General Assembly on the opportunities and needs of the rural church, which will in turn inform the work of RWG as it continues to support the rural church within the Church of Scotland to thrive.

Consultation methodology:

The RWG devised a list of questions that it decided would be used during a number of facilitated focus group discussions around the country. Guidance was given as to how to set up the focus groups, including the need for a variety in the demographics of those participating and the requirement to use the prepared questions. As such a consistent approach was sought for the information gathering whilst understanding that there is a wide range of issues within the rural church, depending on the geographical location of the congregation.⁴ The questions were:

1. As followers of Jesus Christ and members of the Church of Scotland in this rural area what are the key opportunities for you to be what you believe God wants you to be?
2. As followers of Jesus Christ and members of the Church of Scotland in this rural area what are the key barriers that hinder you from being who you believe God wants you to be?
3. Can the barriers be grouped in different ways, e.g.
 - issues requiring, in general terms, local solutions;
 - issues requiring consideration and solutions beyond the local.
4. What ideas do you have about possible solutions to these barriers and how might you collaboratively work to bring about those solutions?

Focus groups consulted:

Focus groups were used as the sole source of gathering evidence to support the preparation of this report and they met within the following Presbyteries:

- Jedburgh
- Ayr
- Lochaber
- Argyll
- Abernethy
- Wigton and Stranraer
- Perth
- Stirling
- Inverness

The majority of respondents were aged between 45 & 70 years, with there being an approximate 50/50 split between male and female involvement in the groups.

⁴ Rural church is faced with different types of farming and rural industry from agricultural, forestry, fish farming. There are also differences between island and mainland locations.

D. Key findings:

Question 1: Key Opportunities

- In rural and particularly in remote areas the church is commonly seen as the focal point within communities, with an acknowledgement that it is there for everyone, whether they attend worship or not. There is still a sense, even amongst non-church-goers, of everybody belonging to the parish. In this regard at least it was suggested that 'the parish system still works' in rural communities.
- Church folk, including the minister, tend to be more fully engaged with the local community than may be the case in an urban setting, and are generally seen as a positive attribute.
- There is a natural, parish wide, pastoral involvement – folk living 'on the margins' are less likely to go unnoticed and can be offered immediate practical support.
- The location of church buildings can be an asset – often at the centre of the community and sometimes the only communal facility still available.
- Churches are still generally the default place for rites of passage (weddings, baptisms and funerals).
- Personal connections, with schools and other groups not attached to the church, are healthy.
- Farming activities help to create natural rhythms for church and community life.
- In tourist areas there are great opportunities to showcase not just historical buildings but a living Church.

Question 2: Key Barriers

- In rural churches one person often takes on several roles within the church which can be just too much.
- There is a reducing number of people available and willing to take office bearers roles.
- A significant proportion of present office bearers are quite elderly.
- An urban model of church is applied across the CoS which does not fit in many rural situations.
- The time taken for Ministers to cover large geographical areas and multiple congregations means that it is difficult to find time to do other than the basic ministerial tasks. Often the more creative missional work is lost.
- With the majority of the workforce employed in farming there are seasons when people just aren't able to engage in church life.
- Population shifts have a marked impact: younger people move to more urban areas, leaving an elderly population and, whilst still living there, the youth shift their focus from the local to High School contacts.
- There can be a lack of local connection in some families. They work or study in nearby towns/cities spending little time and energy on engaging with their rural community.
- There is often a poverty of resources: lack of access to Christian bookshops, conferences etc.; poor internet connection; and few people.
- It is difficult to keep church buildings open beyond the regular times of use.
- People can experience a strong sense of isolation.
- Current parish and presbytery boundaries can work against natural collaboration.
- Charges are often linked in ways that don't always make sense to those seeking to meet the needs locally.

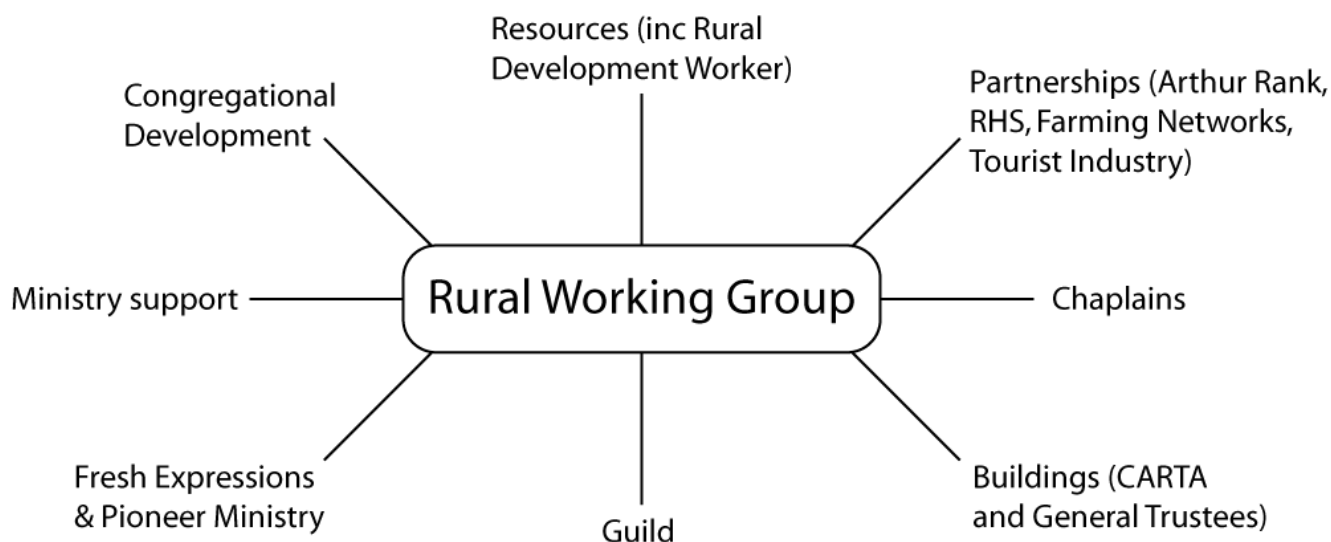
Question 3 & 4: Solutions

It was decided that the responses to question 3 and 4 were best presented together.

- Café Church, Messy Church and other Fresh Expressions are producing good responses in rural communities. Such good news stories should be shared.
- The ministry of hospitality should be developed. This will encourage congregations to remember to be Christ focused as they seek to meet the needs of those in their communities.
- Share stories of how we can change the way things are presently run, e.g. different models for running Guilds.
- Share good news stories of where linking charges has been effective.
- Develop the laity so that there is not an over dependence on the minister.
- Enable congregations to make greater use of technology and social media: using the church to broadcast broadband to its community, church websites, emails and social media.
- Develop a cohesive strategy for rural work in the National Church.
- Develop a more formal partnership with the Arthur Rank Organisation, possibly similar to the Fresh Expressions partnership, so as to tap into this significant rural resource base.
- Enable the sharing of resources within the CoS and ecumenically.
- Acknowledge the need to resource rural parishes.
- Approach Fresh Expressions to look at approaches in the rural context.
- Regional gatherings for resourcing are seen to be more effective than more central national ones.

E. Proposals arising:

The RWG believe that the consultation findings enable it to form the beginnings of strategic way forward for rural congregations within the CoS that will enable them to thrive and not just survive. Within that is the need to create a new model of rural church which could be developed alongside a rural strategy designed to adequately support rural ministries and mission. The RWG proposes that the following areas be addressed to see growth and development within the rural church:



1. Rural Working Group remit:

The clear message from the consultation groups is that rural mission, which is peculiarly relational in style and content, is normally done best by locally based and locally trained practitioners, and it is therefore proposed that the remit for the RWG be revised to the following in order that it might continue to play a strategic role in supporting and enabling rural congregations to thrive:

- Raise the profile of the needs of rural congregations and presbyteries.
- Enable engagement with the ministry and missional opportunities found in rural areas.
- Resource rural congregations as they seek to develop.
- Assist in the development and support of regional and or national events/ conferences /forums with a rural focus.

2. Encourage the rural churches to flourish:

- Enable engagement with rural resources.
- Encourage cross parish and cross Presbytery initiatives.
- Develop guidance to enable congregations and Presbyteries to deliver regional conferences or forums.
- Enable remote access to support and development provision, being mindful that rural areas often have limited broadband coverage.
- Develop a rural section/forum hosted on the main CoS website which is easily accessible and enables the sharing of resources.
- Consider increased use of video conferencing which will require support to install both nationally and locally.
- Enable congregations to consider other ways of doing church, e.g. via Fresh Expressions, and give congregations the freedom to explore what that means for their church and community. This could allow a move away from maintaining what has been to allow growth and vision thereby developing rural church fit for the 21st century.

3. Training and support for congregational involvement:

- Enable people to be rural disciples
- Equip congregations to move to a team based ministry, if appropriate to the context
- Provide effective training based on rural needs
- Deliver more local, rather than national, based training provision
- Enable the use of the Statistics for Mission parish profiles to assist in informing work

- Share good practice stories from other rural areas in relation to work with children and young people.

4. Streamline the governance:

- Identify where requirements from the central administration can be reduced, e.g. the completion of building surveys questionnaires which becomes an overly onerous task when office bearers are few.
- Provide help centrally for some for the legal aspects.
- Provide additional support for local governance on finance and administration.
- Encourage different models of local church governance and guilds.
- Provide support centrally and/or regionally from CARTA, General Trustees, professionals to rural charges for the building surveys and support to those who take on the role of property convener or indeed where no convener can be found.

5. Flexible and invisible borders:

- Encourage an ethos whereby Presbytery borders are considered to be invisible and collaboration a positive approach to be adopted rather than the being held back by concerns that working together is the precursor to being joined together.
- Encourage congregations to get to know their neighbouring congregations, extending invites to share work, events and initiatives.
- Provide signposting for young people that linking them with other churches as they move away to college and university.
- Encourage the forming of links with other churches for young people travelling to Secondary School out with parish boundaries.
- Develop the approach where like-for-like association is the driver for linkages etc. rather than geographical association.

6. Strategic development:

- The scope of the RWG should be re-visited in relation to the rural agenda and consideration given to putting in place a resourced Rural Areas Committee as part of Mission and Discipleship Council that can adequately support rural charges.
- Develop more formal links with the Arthur Rank Organisation and other rural organisations so as to share resources etc.
- Engage in proactive collaborative working with the various Councils and departments of the CoS on the rural agenda.
- Provide provision for a National Rural Development Worker post to raise the profile, support and resource congregations and ministries in conjunction with Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Council.
- Work with the Vocations initiative to raise the profile of rural ministry.
- Proactively seek ministers to serve and be trained to serve in rural contexts.
- Carry out an analysis of how many rural charges are vacant and the number of long term vacancies in these charges to assess whether this is an issue that is predominantly specific to the rural context.
- Encourage rural parishes to engage in mission opportunities that are relevant to that context.

F. Conclusion

Having taken stock of the observations and suggestions of a whole range of committed Rural Mission practitioners from all across the length and breadth of Scotland, the RWG proposes that a loosely structured rural network should be established, through which training and encouragement would be offered to individuals and parishes, at a regional level. A centralised RWG would continue to provide some assistance in this regard (help setting up new regional groupings; signposting resources; sharing stories; providing publicity for regional events/programmes), but it is clear that in the initial stages especially, this initiative would benefit greatly from the support and insight of a dedicated Rural Mission Development Worker.

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