

Sustaining Faith in the Future: a Lent Course

Introduction & Explanation

It is 20 years since the Archbishops' Commission On Rural Areas (ACORA) brought out the report [Faith in the Countryside](#). In the last 2 decades there has been much that has happened in the rural church and in rural communities for which we should be grateful.

- The recommendation that there should be a full time Church of England [National Rural Officer](#) has been implemented and exciting and pioneering work has been done by those who have held the post.
- The creation of a post of [Rural Officer](#) or [Agricultural Chaplain](#) in almost every diocese to serve the needs of rural communities and support mission & ministry taking place in the local area.
- Creative and innovative local projects serving communities in all sorts of ways: through the creative use of church buildings (e.g. for concerts, exhibitions, farmers markets or post offices); or services for the community (e.g. regular social opportunities, IT training, support for those who have lost jobs).
- Partnership working with local organisations at the village and district levels.
- New ideas for mission & ministry, particularly with children & young people and older people.
- The [Arthur Rank Centre](#) at Stoneleigh, Warwickshire is a focus for the national churches in their rural work. Training in rural ministry and multi parish work takes place regularly.
- The magazine [Country Way](#) continues to be an excellent resource for rural churches.
- The workbook [Seeds in Holy Ground](#) is been a valuable tool for rural churches.

However, all in the garden is not rosy. There continue to be challenges for rural churches. This Lent Course is designed to help churches corporately to identify and rise to their own particular challenges. It is being put together with the needs of small rural churches to the fore. As such it can also serve as part of the ongoing faith development of such churches.

If it is simply run as a course that a group of keener church members come to, talk about and then go away from, then this course will have failed. **It is more likely to produce long term benefits for rural churches if whatever group is engaged in these discussions is also the group that makes decisions for the church.** For that reason it would be good if this course could be seen as an extension of the PCC's activities.

The sessions include a discussion as to what the local church should do. So that this course doesn't end up as just yet more hot air from the church it would be good if the answers to those questions could be recorded and PCC's could consider how those decisions can be implemented.

Sessions:

1. Buildings – blessings or burden?
 2. Administration – round pegs & square holes
 3. Worship – make a joyful noise to the Lord
 4. Working Together – sing choirs of angels
 5. Vocation – a pilgrim people
 6. Evangelism – the dreaded “E” word
- The complete course is also downloadable below.

A word to Non-Anglican denominations

Just as the original report was a Church of England report addressed to Church of England churches but something which was a source of insight and blessing to other denominations so too I hope this course, whilst addressing particularly Church of England concerns, will be something that other denominations will find accessible. Please accept my apologies for using Church of England terminology throughout, talking about PCC's etc, but please feel free to translate it into your own language!

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Sustaining Faith in the Future

A few practical points (especially for group leaders)

The social side of a course

This is as important as any other. Simple refreshments, tea, coffee, squash, biscuits... are important. They're probably better at the beginning of the meeting than the end (particularly if you have people for whom late evening drinks means a midnight visit to the loo!)

Starting the meeting

There are a variety of different opening exercises (see below). Choose which ever you think will work best with your group. You may like to use the same one each time if your group likes consistency, or you might like to ring the changes if your group likes variety.

Discussions

If you are in a larger group (8 or more) you may need to break into threes and fours for discussion.

Meditation/Prayer

This may work best if done as silent prayer rather than people feeling that they ought to be saying something. Don't be afraid of quite lengthy silences, 10 minutes or more. If you are leading the group then it may be helpful for the group if after suitable lengths of quiet you encourage them to pray/meditate on the next bullet point listed. Agree how the prayer/meditation is to finish, e.g. At the end I'll say "Amen" so we know we've finished.

Questions for possible action

Probably best done in whole group.

Opening Activities

Refreshments at the start give an opportunity for late arrivals to turn up without disrupting the session, but beware of allowing too much 'drift'. If you do, you may find that you get later and later as the weeks go on! Choose one of the activities below – either the same each week, or change them around – to start your time. People coming may well have had busy days and their concerns may encroach on your time if they are not put to one side.

- a. Each person has a small stone. Have a small cross somewhere central in the room. Spend five minutes thinking about the day so far and any particular person/situation on your mind. At the end of the five minutes place the stone by the cross, representing placing the concern in God's hands. At the end of the evening people *may* choose to pick their stone back up again.
- b. After a minute or two of silence, each person has up to a minute (which should be timed – some find it difficult to be concise) to talk about:
 - Something good that has happened to them that day
 - Something good they are hoping will happen to a friend the next day
- c. Spend ten minutes as a group reflecting on an icon, other religious artwork, flower arrangement or other visual focus.
- d. In silence, spend five minutes with your hands open and palms facing downwards, mentally going through the things on your mind you want to let go of. Then spend five minutes with your palms facing upwards as a sign of your willingness to receive from God.
- e. Spend ten minutes listening to some de-stressing music – not necessarily religious, but it could be.

Sustaining Faith in the Future

Session One: Buildings - blessing or burden?

The roof leaks. The floor is subsiding. The windows are perishing. The heating is ineffective, the pews are uncomfortable. The “Heritage Lobby” objects to each and every alteration that we try to make. It is taking all our resources just to maintain this outdated pile of stones. Money which could be used to pay Parish share, clergy expenses, heating bills ... is being swallowed up in architect’s fees. Surely the best thing we could do is to employ a diocesan arsonist!

The church was built to be the centre of community. It was designed to house village activities. The building tells the story of the village not just through the monuments to the great and good from the Victorian age but from the very stones themselves cut from a local quarry. The churchyard is raised above the level of the nearby road because it quite literally embodies the history of that place. The building is where people brought their hopes, fears and joys for countless centuries. The challenge to the church is to recover something of the ancient intention for the building. So how can this be done?

Bible reading

Read Psalm 84

It can be dangerous to make a direct leap from what happened with the Old Testament Temple and conclude that the same ought to happen with our Parish Church today! But it’s a useful starting point. From this psalm we see that the Temple was a place

- of beauty - “How lovely is your dwelling place...”
- where God is - “How lovely is your dwelling place...”
- of belonging for all, even wildlife! – “Even the sparrow...”

In the time of Jesus’ ministry it was also a place

- of encounter with people – remember Mary and Joseph’s encounter with Simeon and Anna at the time of the Presentation of Christ (Luke 2:21ff)
- of teaching, discussion and debate – think of the boy Jesus at the Temple debating with the teachers (Luke 2:41ff) or the adult Jesus’ words “Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching...” (Mat 26:55)
- of exploitation. Jesus’ criticism of the traders when he drove them out was not about trade, but that they had turned what should have been a house of prayer for all nations into “a den of robbers” (Mat 21:12ff)

Discuss

Talk about

- places where you experience beauty, the presence of God, belonging, encounter with people, discussion, teaching, debate...
- the temple was supposed to be a place which met human need for belonging to God and neighbour, yet it had lost sight of its original purpose and become perverted into a place of exploitation. Did the church with its memorials to the rich and its larger more comfortable pews for the squire connive with an exploitative system? Are there other ways church buildings have or still do reinforce exploitation?

Meditation/Prayer

- give thanks for places you have experienced beauty...
- ask forgiveness for the times church buildings have reinforced exploitation.

Questions for possible action

1. Is the building left unlocked
Research indicates that there are more thefts from locked churches than unlocked and generally the Ecclesiastical Insurance Company is happy for buildings to be unlocked. A locked door gives the message that the building belongs to the vicar and congregation a place of exclusion not inclusion. An unlocked door gives the message that the building belongs to the whole community. Valuable candlesticks, crosses etc can be locked away in the vestry or nearby house. If the church is to be a blessing it needs to be “owned” by the local community.
2. Notice Board – How do people know what is and isn’t happening in the church?
If the notice board is inside a locked porch that effectively sends a negative signal to the village community – what is happening is for us, not for you. The notice board at the boundary of the property with up to date information and avoiding churchy language, helps to see the building as belonging to them.
3. What about the path from the gate to the door? Is it overgrown with overhanging branches or is it open and inviting?
4. Is the door easy to open on well oiled hinges or does it require perseverance, skill and knowledge in order to be able to open it?
5. What about when you are inside?
Is there something to tell visitors that they are welcome? People do visit village churches for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes for the sake of the architecture, sometimes trying to trace family trees, but looking at visitor books what they so often find is peace, tranquillity and stillness, a place of refreshment and renewal.
6. And outside?
Can the churchyard be a place for “the sparrow to find her nest” and the richness of biodiversity that is part of God’s creation?
7. Back inside again, can the building be a place for the village to meet? There are church buildings that host Post Offices, Shops, and all sorts of community activities. What could you do to make that happen? How could you ensure it did not become exploitative? Have a look at Story no. 1 below.
8. Money! Last on the list (though I guess some may be tempted to start at the bottom and work up!!)
If the building is there for the congregation to worship in, then the congregation should pay for its upkeep. If it is there to meet the wider community’s need then experience shows the wider community is happy to help with the bills. A “Friends of” scheme will work if the building itself is a friend to the community. Have a look at Story no. 2 below.

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

We love the place, O God,
wherein thine honour dwells;
the joy of thine abode
all earthly joy excels.

Buildings Stories

1. In 1285, Edward I granted the village of Shipbourne permission to hold a weekly market. The last shop in Shipbourne closed in 1981 and some of the local farmers who had diversified their businesses needed more outlets to sell their produce. The Vicar decided to look into the idea of a Farmers' market inside the church. It took 18 months from the initial idea to come to fruition, but the first market was held in May 2003.

The objectives were to:

- create a service for our community
- support local farmers, producers & craftsmen
- raise funds for relevant farming charities at home & abroad

But there were administrative hurdles to be overcome, including: health & safety; trading standards, insurance, environmental health; provision of toilets.

The Grade I listed building had no toilets, but the next-door pub opened theirs to people visiting the market. A few stalls are in the Church Approach, the rest are inside the church itself. Regular stalls now include two greengrocers, local meat, homemade pies, smoked fish, pickles & preserves, cheese and freshly-baked bread. Boards are laid across the pews.

The weekly Thursday morning market attracts around 150 people each week right through the winter. It provides a valuable service to local people who don't have access to their own transport, and gives another outlet to hard-pressed farmers.

In 2005 they were winners of the Taste of Kent Award for the best Farmers' Market in the country; and in 2007 they were one of the finalists in the BBC Good Food Awards.

2. The friends of St Nicholas Church (FOSN) was set up in response to a request from the Rector following an electrical failure in the church building that effectively closed it until a temporary repair could be carried out. The church has lighting but not heating following this temporary repair. The problem didn't stop with the immediate repairs, though. The last Quinquennial Report identified £50,000-worth of urgent work that needed doing more or less straight away. Three years later, none had been done.

Setting up the charity was very simple and the Charity Commissioners were very helpful. The whole process only took 2 weeks from the initial online application.

Shortly after setting up FOSN a local electrician said he would do the immediately-required electrical work on the church 'at cost', so reducing the estimated bill from £20,000 to £12,000. The PCC already had sufficient money to cover this and set about organising the Faculty necessary to start the work. The FOSN have received – to date – about £5,000 from an appeal to villagers, receipts from a sponsored London Marathon run, a donation from a sports club and the proceeds of a raffle at a village event. Landfill Tax credits have promised a grant for £20,000. There are still plenty of fundraising that we haven't acted on yet, too.

So 6 months after our first meeting, six complete novices – who have met five times for about 1½ hours after each meeting – are now in receipt of, or have been promised, half the funds needed. Maybe we just got lucky with the timings of meetings and the people we talked to, but it certainly showed us what is possible with a bit of effort!

Sustaining Faith in the Future

Session Two: Administration - round pegs and square holes

It's the first PCC meeting after the annual church meeting. We struggled at that to find church wardens and deanery synod representatives and now it is time to find all the other office holders that the PCC seems to need, Deputy Wardens, Secretary, Treasurer, Village Hall Representative, Person to be responsible for Child Protection, Person to be responsible for protecting vulnerable adults, Benefice Council Representatives ... the list seems to go on and on.

For small congregations it can seem that the structures were designed by people whose only experience was of large churches or designed for a time of limitless volunteers with limitless time and energy. So, what to do?

Bible reading

Read Deuteronomy Chapter 1 verses 6-18

Unrealistic expectation of one person is nothing new. Moses and the Israelites had to find a new way of filling his role. Today there may be unworkable demands on clergy, churchwardens, PCC secretaries... Clergy speak of impossible burdens. So do lay people. God's solution for Moses and the Israelites was to find a right balance. Jesus spoke about his yoke being well fitting (Mat 11:30)

Discuss

Talk about

- What expectations do you have of the vicar, churchwarden, PCC secretary....?
- What are the expectations of parishioners, the diocese of these people?
- What is realistic?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for the people who have had important roles in your life and who have helped shape your understanding and experience of God
- Ask forgiveness for unrealistic expectations you may have had of others
- Pray for strength to deal with other people's expectations of what you should do. Pray for wisdom to understand God's expectations of you.

Questions for possible action

1. With any post be clear about what it is that people are being asked to volunteer for. I met one person who had been a church warden for a year. Did she, I asked, know what the legal definition of her church duties was. No, she replied, it would be useful to have a job description. Without getting into the legalistic administrative paperwork burden so beloved by civil servants, there is still a lot to be said for people clearly knowing what it is they are being asked to do – and not do.
2. Can the job be split and broken down into smaller parts so that it can be shared and become a smaller task for more people? If, in your church it has traditionally been the role of the church warden to set up for services (though there is actually no reason why this should be the case) could that part of the job be taken on by someone else.
3. If it is impossible to fill some posts does it matter? Be honest about what can't be done as well as what can be done. If, for example, if it is not possible to get a Deanery Synod Representative, is it possible to find out what is happening at Deanery Synod in some other way? Is it possible to get the minutes of the meeting sent to the PCC secretary who can then keep the council informed of important matters?

4. Are the jobs worth doing anyway? Often people don't volunteer for roles if the roles are tedious and uninspiring. On the other hand meetings that are interesting and rewarding and energising are more likely to attract volunteers. So, again by way of example, if you have difficulty getting a Deanery Synod Representative because Deanery Synod meetings are tedious and dull, has anyone actually told the Deanery Synod? There will be those who have been on Deanery Synod since Noah came out of the ark who will be upset to be told it's dull, but the chances are that there will be others who have exactly that view that it is extremely tedious. It will never reform itself into something useful if, out of a sort of sanctified politeness, people never say anything.
5. What can be shared in the benefice? It may be that each PCC needs to have a Child Protection Representative, for example, but the issues are likely to be the same across the whole of the benefice. Can one parish take responsibility for leading on this issue with the representatives from the other parishes taking a secondary role?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

Lord our God
You have chosen ministers to serve you in your church,
And have given us a perfect example
In the person of your Son;
Pour your blessing upon us your servants
That each in our vocation and ministry
May glorify you
Through Christ our Lord. Amen

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Session Three: Worship – make a joyful noise to the Lord

St Peter tells us that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his glorious light. (1 Pet 2:9ff) but on a cold Sunday morning with a wheezy organ, a coerced arthritic organist, a handful of people scattered around a barn of a building we may feel anything other than chosen, royal, holy and glorious!

Bible reading 1

Read 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 verses 26-40

The problem for the Church in Corinth was that their worship was chaotic and that is what St Paul was trying to get them to address. (All the stuff about women can be seen in this light. The church was still probably following the synagogue pattern of worship with women at the back and men at the front , so the “ask your husband later” injunction is best understood as “if you want to know what he wants for dinner, don’t shout out in the middle of the service – wait till you get home!!”)

But in the chaos (which Paul condemns), there is a complementarity in worship which Paul does not condemn. One person brings a hymn, another brings an instruction, yet another brings a word of prophecy, others (but not too many says Paul) may bring words in tongues. The picture is of all having a role to play. Worship is not a spectator sport. It is participation.

The word “liturgy” comes from two Greek words and means “the work of the people.” Unfortunately it became the performance of the parson. Before the Victorian age worship in rural churches would often be led by the parish clerk and accompanied by the village band. The Victorian clergy saw themselves as experts and modelled worship on cathedral practice. They sacked the village band and installed organs. There were neat rows of pews. People could see the parson, but only the back of the head of the person in front. What had been the offering of worship by the community to God became the offering to the community of worship by the expert. The order that St Paul wanted was there, but the participatory nature of worship was lost. The laity were reduced to the role of spectator whose presence, or absence, was irrelevant.

Discuss

Worship should be orderly, participatory and culturally relevant. Have a look at some of the Worship Stories (below) and talk about

- Without a return to the chaos St Paul condemned, what can be done so worship is genuinely participatory?
- If worship is to be the offering of the community not the offering to the community, how can/should the community be involved in planning the pattern of services, selection of hymns, forms of liturgy? How does bringing in a retired priest, reader or other worship leader from outside the community fit with worship being the offering of the community? Other than voting with their feet, how do the congregation have a say about worship?

Bible reading 2

Read 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 19-23

Here Paul talks about how he enters in to different cultures for the sake of the gospel. Rural worship should be culturally distinctive in two particular ways.

1. Traditional rural people are in contact with creation and the seasons. There should be an engagement with the seasons of the year: Plough, Rogation, Lammas and Harvest. Hymns, prayers and sermons at these times benefit from relating to God as Creator.

2. Part of rural culture is to do with size. Rural churches tend to be small. Teachers & university lecturers complain that their classes get too big, and that say learning is better in a seminar than a lecture. Small congregations give an opportunity for more intimate worship, and to explore different ways of learning together during worship.

Discuss

Again have a look at some of the Worship Stories (below) and talk about

- How does your church's worship relate to God as Creator? Is the reason '*All things bright and beautiful*' remains popular because of its focus on creation? What other creation hymns do you sing? 100 years ago – before the Parish Communion movement – most church's main Sunday service would have been Matins. Mainly it is now a Eucharist, which focuses on the redemptive work of Christ. How can we re-emphasise God's creative work which precedes redemption?
- How do you take advantage of the opportunities of being small?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for those who have participated in worship in your church over the years
- Pray for a greater participation in worship

Questions for possible action

- How can we worship when numbers are small and when the vicar or reader is conducting services all over the place?
- What are the alternatives to the Sunday gallop or grumbling about congregations because they don't travel?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

The love of God has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

We dwell in him and he in us.

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.

Sing to him, sing praises to him,

and speak of all his marvellous works.

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty,
who was and is and is to come.

Worship Stories

- 1.** One church periodically asks congregation members to choose their favourite hymns – up to 20 per person. The combined collection serves two purposes: It means that the church knows what hymns people liked that were not necessarily in the hymnbook, and for which they can produce a supplementary hymn booklet (copyright need not be expensive); It also means that every Sunday some of the hymns could be chosen from this collection – so hymns are no longer solely the vicar's or organist's choice.
- 2.** When Common Worship was published a church wanted to have the benefits of the seasonal material, but without the expense of the complete (black) book for every worshipper ... and all the page turning that would involve. They had an open group from the congregation who looked at the different seasonal material, the different prayers of consecration, and any other alternatives. They then produced a series of little booklets, a green one for Ordinary Time, a yellow one for Easter, a purple one for Lent & Advent – which gave variety with the changes of the seasons. What went in and what was left out was determined by that group from the congregation (of which the vicar was but one member).
- 3.** Another church wanted to pray for the whole village. They had a rota so one street was prayed one month, another street the next. They would drop a note through the letterboxes of the relevant street, telling residents they were going to be prayed for the following month, and inviting requests for prayer. These could quietly be left at the back of the church – as the building wasn't locked.
- 4.** A further church developed a 'seminar' rather than 'lecture' style of sermons. The role of the preacher was to direct discussions, and to make sure that not too many red herrings of hobby horses made their appearance!
- 5.** Still another church identified all the roles that its members had in other village or community organisations. It then used this as a basis for praying for those community organisations, their members and their events.

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Session Four: Working Together – sing choirs of angels

Virtually all churches are now part of a larger group sharing their vicar with a number of others and the vicar quite possibly living at some distance away. How are rural churches to work when they are part of a group of three four or five, or sixteen seventeen or eighteen?

Bible reading

Read Revelation chapter 1 verses 1-6, and chapter 2 verse 1

In his book *Unmasking the Powers* Walter Wink has a chapter about '*The Angels of the Churches*'.

Drawing on the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation, he suggests that it is helpful to think of churches having an "angel" that somehow represents and shapes the character of the church.

That "angel" will be shaped both by the physical environment, the condition and comfort of the building and churchyard, by the current membership of the congregation and by the church's history – the influences of those people who have gone before. One Baptist Minister I knew told me that the most powerful personality in her church was the widow of a former Minister. The former Minister had been dead for decades. The widow too had herself been dead for a number of years, but if Mrs so and so wouldn't have liked it then whatever was suggested still didn't happen.

Another church had years with a leaking roof, crumbling stonework, peeling paint, rotten windows and subsiding floor. The churchwarden pursued any & every imaginable source of grant funding. That, together with some fundraising events, enabled the PCC to get the problem put right. It transformed the atmosphere of the church, and the "angel" went from being depressed & fearful to confident. Even after that churchwarden moved away, the PCC still had a positive, 'can do' attitude towards its mission.

Those disparate characteristics go together to make the character or the angel of the church. As with people, the angel of a church may be depressed, despondent, angry, optimistic, glad, happy ... The characteristics of the church will shape the behaviour of the people in them.

Discuss

Talk about

- What shapes the "angel" of your church?
- How does your church's angel shape your and other members' behaviour?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for all the things that have shaped your church's angel in a positive way.
- Ask forgiveness for the negative aspects of the angel.
- Pray for a positive "can do" angel in the future

For further thought

What happens when a group of churches are brought together in a benefice or team?

The image that I find helpful is to think of a choir of angels. In a choir there are times when all the people are singing in unison but the music is actually much more interesting when the choir breaks into parts and starts to harmonise. The overall piece of music is one where the parts within it are rich and varied. So if that applied to a multi parish benefice then the important thing is for the churches to work out what their part in the overall piece of music is.

A choir made up entirely of basses would be tedious as would a choir made up entirely of sopranos. So for your church within the benefice or team that it is a part of, what are the things that your church is good at and what are the things that are working well elsewhere that you don't need to do, but that you could encourage people from your village to go to if that meets their particular needs?

Perhaps your church has a strong traditional music tradition and is well placed to be known for the way that the Book of Common Prayer, Matins and Evensong is part of its life. Perhaps your church runs an excellent summer club for children. If the neighbouring church runs excellent Taizé services is that something that you from your village could support or encourage others to go to? Choirs enjoy coming together with other choirs from time to time, so what can your church share within the deanery, diocese or with other denominations?

Questions for possible action

1. What is your church's part in your benefice/group? What do you do well? What can you offer to others in the group?
2. What are the other churches' parts in your group? What do they do that you would benefit from?
3. Are there other denominations that you need to be in harmony with?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

Angel-voices ever singing
round thy throne of light,
angel-harps for ever ringing,
rest not day nor night;
thousands only live to bless thee
and confess thee
Lord of might.

Sustaining Faith in the Future

Session Five: Vocation - a pilgrim people

A church organist was at a training session encouraging people to be aware of some of the better new church music. Toward the end of the session he was heard to comment, *"It's like the words of the hymn. 'Change and decay in all around I see' It's all change and decay, change and decay."*

It is a truism that the only constant in society today is change, but it's true never the less. It's tempting to want there to be an unchanging church (even if we never go to it) that is a bastion of stability in a world in turmoil. But it's not possible and even if it were, it would not be beneficial.

Bible reading

Read Genesis chapter 11 verse 27 to chapter 12 verse 9

God calls Terah to go Canaan but he stopped at Haran and settled there. He disappears from the story of faith. Abram responds to God's call to journey and becomes Abraham, the Father of Faith. Journeying means change. It means travelling light. It means using something at one stage of the journeys and then putting it aside when it has served its purpose.

That is challenging for us because journeying into something new is, by definition, travelling into the unfamiliar. The Israelites travelling from Egypt wanted to return (Exodus 16:2) because the past is familiar territory. Even if it was not much fun, at least we survived in the past and so it feels safer than an unknown future. But Terah got stuck, and we are called to be a pilgrim people.

What is there that you might stop doing that were once doing, a good idea at that time but no longer serve their original purpose or don't work as they used to? Being a pilgrim people it is about putting things down as well as about picking things up. If prayer book matins is a real struggle but your church is good at doing something else, then why not give up matins and encourage those people for whom it is important to enjoy it at a neighbouring church while you get on with your Iona services. If you used to have a fete but now organising the church fete is a drain on your resources that doesn't repay the effort and there are very good fetes close by, then why not concentrate instead on what you can do.

Discuss

Talk about

- What are the things from the past that you have valued that it might now be time to lay aside? (e.g. Sunday Schools, BCP Matins, Organists ...)
- God is sovereign and he is calling fewer people into ordained ministry than in the past, but He has called large numbers of lay people into all sorts of exciting roles. What does that say about the inherited role of clergy? What are the implications for future patterns of ministry of the **whole** church – lay and ordained?

Meditation/Prayer

- Give thanks for all that is good in the church's past.
- Ask forgiveness for reluctance to embrace an unfamiliar future.
- Pray for wisdom to follow God's leading.

Questions for possible action

1. Make a list of things from the past that God is calling you to put to one side.
2. Make a list of things that you think he might be calling you to pick up for this stage of the journey.
3. How will you communicate that with the wider parish and manage the inherited expectations?

4. Might some formal service of thanksgiving for past achievements, and whatever you are leaving to one side, help you and the parish to move forward?
5. What about a service of preparation & prayer as a new activity starts?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so the PCC can implement it!

Prayer

He who would valiant be
'gainst all disaster,
let him in constancy
follow the Master.
There's no discouragement
shall make him once relent
his first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim.

Who so beset him round
with dismal stories,
do but themselves confound -
his strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might,
though he with giants fight:
he will make good his right
to be a pilgrim.

Since, Lord, thou dost defend
us with thy Spirit,
we know we at the end
shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away!
I'll fear not what men say,
I'll labour night and day
to be a pilgrim.

Sustaining Faith in the Future

Session Six: Evangelism – the dreaded “E” word

If there is one word that is likely to send shivers of fear down the backs of most rural congregations, it is *‘evangelism’*. This session looks at what evangelism is – and what it isn’t – and helps think about what will work where you are.

‘Evangelism’ may conjure up images of big events with large crowds, emotive speakers, loud music, appeals to ‘come forward’, invitations to come to church, hands waved in the air, people describing how utterly immoral they once were and how they’ve now been unbelievably transformed ... However realistic such images may or may not be of evangelism today, it bears very little resemblance to evangelism as the Bible portrays it, or as it occurs in most local churches & communities.

Bible reading 1

Read Luke chapter 10 verses 1-12

We will benefit from noting various things from Jesus’ directions to the Seventy-Two:

- They don’t operate alone, but in pairs. Evangelism is a shared activity.
- They go, they don’t invite people to come to them. They go to where people are actually going to be found.
- Evangelism is small scale. Jesus says *‘when you enter a house’* not *‘in the rented stadium’*.
- The evangelists are received as guests and they respect their hosts ... *‘eat and drink whatever they give you’*. They are to allow their hosts to meet their needs, and not to complain if the hospitality isn’t all they might have wished.
- They are sent with a message of good news ... *‘the Kingdom of God is near’*. What the hearers do with the message is between them and God; but Jesus doesn’t send the Seventy-Two to voice opinions or tell people what they ought to do.
- Evangelism is inextricable linked to action, and isn’t just words. The sick being healed is a sign of the nearness of the Kingdom that is being announced. The famous quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi reminds of the integral importance of acts: *‘Preach the Gospel always. If necessary use words’*.
- There appears to be a complete lack of ‘follow up’. No-one gets signed up to a Christian basics course!

Bible reading 2

Read Acts chapter 1 verses 7-8

‘You will be my witnesses’ – *‘witness’* is a legal term; a witness simply tells us what s/he has seen or heard. It isn’t up to a witness to try and interpret their evidence. That is a matter for the jury assisted by the judge and the counsels for prosecution & defence.

Discuss

Talk about

- *‘The Kingdom of God is near’*. Mission has been described as seeing what God is doing, and joining in. Where do you see signs of God’s kingdom of justice, belonging, forgiveness, healing, creativity, reconciliation ... being established in your village? How can you join in?
- What is the difference between *‘outreach’* and *‘drag in’*? How, as a church, do you engage with people where they are physically, emotionally & spiritually?
- What is the equivalent for us to be ‘receiving hospitality’ from people we are among, and respecting them as ‘hosts’?
- Which of the Evangelism Stories (see below) fit with the picture of evangelism considered above? Which do you think you might be able to do?

- Who told you the good news that the Kingdom of God is near? What happened to you that you came to believe it?

Meditation/Prayer

- Spend some time giving thanks to God for those people who have shaped your faith.
- Spend some time praying that your faith will continue to grow & develop.
- Spend some time praying for someone important to you, that their faith may develop.

Questions for possible action

1. What things from among the Evangelism Stories (see below) do you think might work in your village?
2. What do you think you could do?

And nearly finally

Make a note of what you have agreed so that PCC can implement it!

Prayer

Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.

Evangelism Stories

1. There was a lady who had been brought up as a Christian, and had not had a particularly easy life. Now in her 60s, and working as a cleaner, life was good but still presented her with struggles: her husband was disabled, her son was in the middle of a messy relationship break up. She regularly attended a quiet traditional mid-week communion service, about which she used to say, *'It gives me such a feeling of peace – I'm not sure how I could cope without it'*. That was her being a witness. Nobody could contradict her; not even the most militant atheist could tell her she was wrong.
2. A church was good at catering, so they held *'Food for Thought'* suppers. Twice a year they would hold a series of suppers in the village hall – one a fortnight for 6 weeks. They were simple & inexpensive; diners could bring their own wine. At the end of each there was an after-dinner speaker – almost always a lay person talking about their work and how their faith affected the issues they faced.
One speaker was a farmer, talking about faith that when you plant something it will grow, and that there will be a market for it. Another was a printer who touched on the dilemma of being asked to print pornographic – but still legal – material. Should he have turned the job down – other printers would have taken it on instead – and risk his employees being out of work? Another was a trainer with a large bank, who talked about his and the bank's role in developing people's full potential. After some initial hesitation among non-churchgoers, the suppers became well-supported. When problems in Afghanistan started bubbling up, the church provided *'A Flavour of the North-West Frontier'* – an evening using Afghan recipes and a speaker who had worked in Afghanistan with the Church Mission Society, talking about Afghan culture. By no means did all those who came to the suppers start filling the pews (though this did coincide with a period of church growth); but they all had food for thought, and an appreciation that Christian faith has relevance to 'ordinary' life.
3. Another church that would have run a mile from the idea of door-to-door evangelism was very happy to go carol singing. Having the advantage of serving a small village, they sang carols door-to-door round the whole village in early/mid-December. They collected, not for the Church, but for a local charity and they gave all the houses a simple Christmas card with greetings and details of opportunities for worship in all the local churches.
4. Unable to staff regular children's activities, and with only a few children in the village, another church ran a children's Christmas activity session in the village hall. Children did craft work, heard the Christmas story, sang carols and ate mince pies. The craft work then decorated the church windows at the village carol service the following week, and the children brought decorations they had made to hang on the tree.
5. Other churches run similar activities for Good Friday, Mothering Sunday or on a monthly basis. For one, Hallowe'en was a wonderful opportunity as there is nothing inherently occult about apple bobbing, and pumpkin lanterns with crosses are just as appealing to children. A *'Festival of Light'* (following some Middle Eastern Christian traditions) can be a lot of fun, and many parents are glad to have something other than *'trick or treat'* for their children to be involved in.

Sustaining Faith in the Future

And Finally

There are all sorts of resources available to help you.
Amongst the most useful are these

Diocesan Officers

They don't simply sit in the ivory towers of the Diocesan Office. Their purpose is to help PCCs, and others, in their mission. Don't worry about ringing up, and don't worry about which one is responsible for the issue that you want support with. If you phone the 'wrong' person, they'll put you in touch with the appropriate one!

Arthur Rank Centre (ARC)

www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

This is the home of the National Churches' Rural Officers and other staff with lots of experience and dedicated to helping rural churches and rural church practitioners. They also have a very wide range of resources, including:

- **Country Way** www.countryway.org.uk. This is an excellent magazine published three times yearly, and full of practical examples of what has worked elsewhere, reviews of recent books (so you know what is worth reading ... and what isn't), worship resources. The magazine probably works best when 3-4 people in a congregation subscribe and can suggest to a PCC that it should think about doing something based on what is in the magazine.
- **Worship Resources** www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications-and-resources/worship-resources. In particular, you can search through an enormous range of freely available worship & liturgical material by categories at www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/worship-resources-search?worship=yes.
- **All sort of other resources** www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications-and-resources. Some relate specific to parts of this Lent Course, e.g.
 - Tools for simple, low-key evangelism as part of the ongoing life of the local church and community www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications-and-resources/rural-evangelism
 - A wealth of information & guidelines on all aspects of adapting & using your church building www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications-and-resources/rural-church-buildings
- **Training for your vicar (!)** www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/mission-and-ministry/arc-training. Various courses and workshops are offered over 2-3 days during a week, but clergy often say it is difficult to attend due to the demands of busy parishes or benefices. Can you free up your vicar so s/he can attend?

Rural Theology Association (RTA)

<http://ruraltheologyassociation.com/>

The RTA produces an excellent Journal, and local groups for lay & ordained people.

Rural Evangelism Network (REN)

www.ruralevangelism.net

The REN has expertise in rural evangelism.