# Germinate Newsletter

**CONTENTS...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germinate News</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Roundup</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Isolation and Loneliness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From loneliness to friendship</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Belongers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural isolation: local and global</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parish Nursing: good health and engaging community</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churches Linking Lives in rural communities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PULL OUT: Rural Isolation and Loneliness</strong></td>
<td>15–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Isolation and Loneliness continued:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alzheimer’s Disease: a personal journey</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging becomes believing</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always room for one more</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming isolation: a personal perspective</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messy and rural: Messy Church in rural communities</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural Mission</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messy Ramblings: stories from rural Messy Churches</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumbria: Easter Journey in Langwathby</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powys: The Tent and the Tree</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire: Making a difference in Denby Dale</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancashire: Tackling Rural Isolation in the Parish of Pilling</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucestershire: Roaming disabled driver visits</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>650 Gloucestershire churches for Ride+Stride</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Isolation and loneliness

Nine years ago, I moved from very urban East London to Leicestershire to take up a role as a youth worker in a large village. Prior to this relocation my experience of rural life was limited to summer holidays spent in Norfolk, Cornwall and Wales and therefore consisted largely of rose-tinted memories of rolling hills, sandy beaches and holiday lets. As you might imagine, I had quite a lot of adjusting to do!

As I spent time getting to know my new community, two things struck me. The first was just how much slower the pace of life was; the second was that people said hello to each other in the street. I’d heard of this phenomenon but I’d largely written it off as some kind of rural myth. It took me a while but eventually I mastered the art of looking people in the eye as I walked along the pavement, and even took to extending a cheery ‘Hiya!’ to all and sundry!

The reality is, of course, that this is only one side of the complex story of rural life in the UK. As we are reminded on an almost daily basis, isolation and loneliness are reaching epidemic proportions in communities across the country, despite the fact that we live in a world that has never been more connected.

In this edition of Country Way we have tried to reflect the powerful reality that isolation and loneliness impacts the young and the old, the healthy and the sick, carers and those being cared for, longstanding members of rural communities and those newly arrived.

The Mothers’ Union, Parish Nursing and Linking Lives have reflected on their shared commitment to combatting isolation and loneliness in ways which reflect their global, national and regional perspectives while Anne Richards and the Bishop of Manchester, David Walker, offer insights into ways in which rural churches might respond to those in their communities who find themselves in need of relationships of substance.

These ‘bigger picture’ perspectives are balanced by some deeply moving personal accounts of isolation and loneliness which sit alongside local stories of transformational engagement in local community life.

And our pull-out resources section contains practical tools that we hope you’ll find useful in your own church and community as well as some great recommended reading!

As Anne Richards concludes in her article, ‘Thinking about who might be hidden from everyday life, waiting for some simple, human contact to brighten their day is the Christian responsibility of all of us. It will take up our time. It will break up our busy lives. It will pull on our resources. But Jesus calls us to follow his example and step outside the crowds that surround us to find the person who is lonely, overlooked, excluded, shut out, unseen and unheard, and extend to them the hand of friendship.’

Louise Davis
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Need a low cost, reliable laptop or desktop?
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Prices from as little as £140
(including delivery, warranty and £20 donation to Germinate:The Arthur Rank Centre).

For more information contact: John Bennett on 024 7685 3066
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Search our website for more information: germinate.net
Welcome to Claire!

We’re delighted to announce that Revd Claire Maxim, currently Rector of the villages of Ludgershall and Faberstown in the Diocese of Salisbury, will become Germinate’s new CEO in April 2018!

Claire was originally an engineer, has an MBA from Henley Business School, a Diploma in Applied Theology from The Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham, and is studying for a Professional Doctorate at the Centre for Rural Ministry Studies at the University of Warwick.

‘Claire’s appointment was a unanimous decision from a field of exceptionally strong candidates,’ said Germinate Chair of Trustees, Howard Petch. ‘We are thrilled that Claire accepted the invitation to be the next CEO of Germinate and to build on the foundations laid under Jerry’s leadership.’

Of his successor, Jerry said, ‘Claire’s sense of humour, hands-on experience, ecumenical perspective developed at Queen’s, and her understanding of the wide variety of rural contexts will stand her in excellent stead.’

‘I am excited by the direction Germinate has taken over recent years and look forward to continuing and extending that trajectory,’ said Claire. ‘There is a wide diversity of rural contexts so, in terms of communicating the Gospel, one size does not fit all. Germinate is ideally placed to encourage the sharing of ideas and to enable the peer support necessary to allow risk and failure as well as success.’

Farewell to Jerry

It will be with sincere appreciation but a real sense of sadness that we say farewell to our CEO, Jerry Marshall, next month. His five-year tenure at Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre has been one of impact and transformation, and his legacy will be a small charity with a renewed sense of vision and purpose, consistently ‘punching above its weight’.

Applying his entrepreneurial background and experience, and empowering his small but very talented team, Jerry has ensured substantial progress in the task of helping rural churches and communities to flourish. The inspired introduction of the Germinate brand with the associated suite of programmes, including Germinate Enterprise and Germinate Leadership, are making a real difference. A transformed website is testimony to an impressive range of resources relevant to ministry, mission and the deepening of effective Christian presence within our rural communities.

As Chair of Trustees it has been a privilege to work alongside Jerry as he challenged us to ‘think outside the box’ in our endeavour to promote the Kingdom. His passion for the Gospel, his innovative and creative mindset, and the ability to both manage financial resources and engage with a wide range of people have combined to ensure his term of office has been fruitful and productive.

As Jerry relocates nearer to family and returns to a portfolio existence he goes with our blessing, very sincere appreciation and the belief that we will continue to see the impact of his talent and discipleship.

Thank you, Jerry, and may God continue to bless all you do in His name.

Howard Petch
Chair of Trustees, Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre

In Brief

• Fifty-five delegates from all over the world have already booked for the International Rural Churches Association conference in New Zealand in April, with a further 26 awaiting confirmation of a grant. We are planning and praying that the conference will have a long-term transformational impact on the countries that are represented. See irca.online/conferences.

• We were thrilled that Germinate Enterprise won the Best Rural Project Bronze award from the Christian Funders’ Forum. Congratulations to Parish Nursing and Making Space, a social enterprise in former mining communities in south Wales, who won silver and gold respectively.

• Bring together your group of churches and work with others to discern and develop mission and discipleship using the Germinate Groups rural learning community materials. The pilots were enthusiastically received and the materials are now all available. See germinate.net/training/germinate-groups.

• Stay up to date with these and other rural events, resources and funding by receiving Germinate News, our free monthly e-news. Sign up at germinate.net/newsletter-sign-up.
Dates for your diary

Germinate Enterprise business start-up courses
February 2018
Free one-day Germinate Enterprise business start-up courses have been arranged in the South West and Yorkshire with further regional events being explored. The day is for both aspiring entrepreneurs and those interested in facilitating the course in their areas. See germinate.net/mission/germinate-enterprise or contact the Germinate office for details.
Devon / Cornwall: Saturday 3 Feb
East Yorkshire: Saturday 24 Feb

Germinate Lecture:
Examining the ground under our feet
Wednesday 9 May
The Rt Revd Rachel Treweek moved from ministry in the urban Diocese of London to become Bishop of Gloucester in a predominantly rural diocese. In her lecture she will help us explore the soil of our landscape, including some of the stones and thistles, as we seek to be fruitful in being the Church in traditional and new ways in rural areas. Go to germinate.net/training/germinate-leadership/germinate-leadership-lecture for more information.

Rural Mission Sunday 2018:
Growing Together
Sunday 15 July
Rural Mission Sunday is an annual event celebrating the work of small rural churches. Get involved by holding a special service at your church or in your community. Go to germinate.net/mission/rural-mission-sunday for more information.

Germinate Conference 2018
Saturday 13 October
See germinate.net/training/germinateconference for more information, including how to book.

GERMINATE LEADERSHIP

Germinate Leadership is for lay and ordained leaders in rural churches who have already displayed some creative and entrepreneurial flair in ministry and are keen to develop themselves and their skills. Every part of the Germinate Leadership programme is rooted in the opportunities and challenges of ministry in rural contexts and fosters a collaborative, ecumenical approach and a culture of continuing personal and professional development. It is expected that all participants, both lay and ordained, will leave as creative, entrepreneurial and strategic leaders, better equipped to engage effectively with local communities and encourage churches to be an effective Christian presence.

Ruth Gee, former President of the Methodist Conference and Chair of Darlington District has said of the programme:
‘There can be no doubt of the importance of encouraging and supporting creative leadership in the rural church. I believe that Germinate Leadership is enriching the whole church through the discernment and nurturing of the gifts of individual leaders.’
The 2018 Germinate Leadership programme begins with a two-day residential in October and we are now receiving applications. Go to germinate.net/training/germinate-leadership to find out more about the programme, including key dates, programme content and a link to our online application form.

A wise mentor and an interesting and insightful work shadowing opportunity added to the value of the course. I highly recommend it.
Rural Round-up

Crossing the Threshold Toolkit launched

A new updated and extended version of Crossing the Threshold: a step-by-step guide to developing your place of worship for wider community use and managing a successful building project has now been published. It is designed to be used by people looking after church buildings of all denominations. It takes a community development approach towards adapting a church building for wider community use, while balancing the needs of existing worshippers. It breaks down projects into three key stages:

- Preparing the ground
- Looking at your options
- Delivering your project

With numerous case studies, top tips and end-of-chapter checklists, as well as advice from experts in their fields, and with input and expertise from a range of national church organisations, this practical document draws upon the lessons learned from recent church projects of all denominations across the UK.

The toolkit can be downloaded for free at hrballiance.org.uk/resources/crossing-the-threshold

Royal Society of Arts: Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

This commission is a major, two-year independent inquiry, funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and chaired by Sir Ian Cheshire. It has been established to consider how a safe, secure, inclusive food and farming system can be achieved for the UK post-Brexit. It has become essential to think about where our food comes from, how farming is supported and developed, and how a flourishing rural economy with a sustainable and accessible countryside can contribute to food security and the national economy.

The work is being led by Sue Pritchard and will bring together citizens, producers, businesses and academics from different sectors and with diverse perspectives. The aim is to work together to find common purpose, to identify practical and radical solutions, and make policy proposals which can deliver what the nation needs from food, farming and the countryside.

Germinate are planning to engage with the Commission as its work progresses. For more information see thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/public-services-and-communities-folder/food-farming-and-countryside-commission

Old McDonald’s…Vestry?!

Methodists in the little rural village of Eastrington in East Yorkshire struggling with their ageing church building decided that it could still be a place of fun and activity, especially at Festival times.

This year, as well as holding their ever-popular traditional Harvest Festival service, the church celebrated with a mid-week café church gathering and transformed the old vestry into Old McDonald’s Farmyard! 40 schoolchildren enjoyed the fun of the farm and we welcomed some live chickens to the celebration. It was great to have so many folk join us to celebrate ‘all good gifts around us, sent from Heaven above’, and the tiny chapel came alive with singing, prayer, fun and laughter.

It’s so good to see that tiny rural hamlets can be such wonderful places of Christian witness.

Revd Sue Pegg
Minister, Goole and Selby Methodist Circuit

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Vegetable orchestra leads harvest thanksgiving

A carrot, a pumpkin, a courgette and a pepper were just some of the vegetables crafted into instruments at a unique County Harvest Thanksgiving Service which took place at Biddenden Vineyard on 22 October.

Organised by the Diocese’s Communities and Partnerships Framework, it is the first time that the annual service has ever gone out on location. As members of Kent’s food and farming industry gathered together for the service overlooking the vineyard, The London Vegetable Orchestra led them in a verse of ‘We plough the fields and scatter’.

‘This has been a huge success and we’re grateful to Julian Barnes and all the team at Biddenden Vineyard for making us so welcome,’ said Canon Caroline Pinchbeck, Director of the Communities and Partnerships Framework.

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**Christians in Practice**

How do you connect your faith with things that you do in your community? What motivates you to do what you do? Working in partnership with the Salltley Trust, the Church Urban Fund and others, Germinate has been looking into these questions as part of a one-year research project called Christians in Practice.

Based on research with over 1000 worshippers and 32 Anglican congregations in the Dioceses of Birmingham and Lichfield, it seeks to understand:

- What Christians do to help others in their communities
- What motivates Christians to become involved and what the barriers to involvement are
- What connections are made between these activities and faith
- Ways community involvement helps Christians grow and learn
- How Christians feel supported by their local church in this work and how churches might support this better

The Christians in Practice report shows that Christian faith is an important motivator for community engagement, but also that getting involved in such activities helps people grow in their faith. 78% of respondents said that involvement in community engagement activities had helped them grow as a Christian. 65% said that it had helped them understand their faith better.

The study also found that for many Christians community engagement is a way of sharing their faith; more than two-thirds of respondents agreed that they seek to represent Christ through their actions when involved in helping others in their community. 49% said that they looked for opportunities to tell others about their faith when involved in helping others in their community.

Read more at [cuf.org.uk/christians-in-practice-research](http://cuf.org.uk/christians-in-practice-research)

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**Plunkett Foundation**

Improving rural lives together

The Loneliness Campaign

The Plunkett Foundation, long-standing partners of Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre, are running a loneliness campaign until February 2018, highlighting the role of rural community co-operatives in helping individuals overcome issues such as loneliness and isolation. They have created resources for people to use in their communities, encouraging them to take action to help those who may be lonely.

As part of the campaign, they would like to hear stories of ways in which community co-operatives are helping overcome loneliness. Do you volunteer in your local community shop? Have you started a local walking group that meets in a community café? Are you a stay-at-home parent or a home worker who has been supported by a community co-operative? If so, why not share your story?

For more details and to access the resources, visit their website, [plunkett.co.uk](http://plunkett.co.uk).
I recently ran a project to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation and Martin Luther’s 95 Theses. Together with friends from the ecumenical Mission Theology Advisory Group we produced 95 Missional Theses. One of our new ‘theses’ reads:

“We believe in a Church where the lonely can find friends.”

When this statement was posted on social media, it immediately provoked an avalanche of comment and discussion, especially from those clergy and lay people following us from rural situations. Loneliness has been called ‘the last taboo’ and it seemed that posting a statement about loneliness made the unsayable possible.

Here is one of the most poignant stories...

Everyone gritted their teeth when Agnes (not her real name) arrived at church on Sunday. Aged 86, she turned up, started talking… and didn’t stop. She talked about everything and anything, never pausing for a response or to hear from anyone else. She talked through the hymns and the liturgy, through the silences and through the prayers. She talked randomly about what she had for dinner and about the price of eggs. She talked about the flowers on the altar and about the previous vicar. People in the pew near her edged away slowly. At coffee time, people veered away from her so as not to get caught in the flow. So she orbited the room, talking at anyone who accidentally made eye contact with her. She was still talking when she got into her lift home. The driver went out of her way to take her, but was mercifully somewhat deaf.

There was a little sigh of relief when she was safely gone. A lot of people speculated that she was eccentric or that “her mind is going”. Agnes’ mind was fine. The truth was, however, that Agnes didn’t often talk to anyone else all week, except to the presenters on her little radio. She lived in an isolated cottage between two small villages. She had no family, no friends and no visitors. She could cycle to one of the villages to do a bit of shopping but was not robust enough to cycle further afield. She was chronically lonely and the lack of everyday human contact meant that when she came to church everything that was on her mind simply spilled out inappropriately in the midst of this, her only community.

“Agnes desperately needed friends… Agnes was a problem.”

Agnes was a pain. Agnes spoiled the service for others. Agnes was a problem. She was also someone who desperately needed friends, and not just on Sunday. Agnes needed her church to be the source of human interaction and care for her every day.

Apart from Sunday, Agnes was practically invisible. She wasn’t housebound. She wasn’t sick. She didn’t ‘need’ visiting as such. She was capable and independent. She got about on her bike. But the community she lived in has changed. The places she would meet people have closed down; the community centre, the library, the post office in the nearest village have all gone. The main road has been rerouted so that buses no longer stop near the track where she has her house. The cottage hospital has gone. The community where Agnes met people and talked about her daily life has changed shape and moved away from her, leaving her high and dry. And beyond that is her small means. She wasn’t living in poverty but she wasn’t well off enough to travel much. So she did not attract attention, but neither was she getting the companionship and care from human interaction that she needs. She was just… lonely. And then she died.

This heart-breaking, human story echoes much of the Loneliness: Accident or Injustice? report produced by Jo Ind for the Diocese of Oxford. In villages where younger people have moved away and older people become more disabled, loneliness can creep up on those whose lives were previously marked by gregariousness and community. Nor is this limited to older people; I have come across children and young people who are cut off from their school friends and peer groups because they may not have the money, parental help or the transport to reach them. Loneliness and rural isolation are markers of poorer mental health. One person I talked to recently said that she has regular GP appointments, not because she is actually ill, but because she gets to talk to the receptionist and have a one to one with the doctor for ten minutes. This is a recognised common denominator in illness and comes with an economic cost too. There is often a deep shame associated with being lonely, as if it were a failure, something to apologise for.

So what’s our response to this, if ‘we believe in a Church where the lonely can find friends’? It’s got to be more than being a place where the chronically lonely can, like Agnes,
splurge on community. Jo Ind talks about the intimacy of Christian community, an intimacy that comes from God. But that intimacy, closeness, care and love cannot be limited to inside the church doors. Something else has to happen to enable friendships and face-to-face relationships extend to where people are and how they are living. We have to imagine those living with loneliness and then go and find them. There are models of good practice: the Archway Foundation (archwayfoundation.org.uk) in Oxford is one such group working to address loneliness.

It’s not just the vicar’s job to visit people and check on their wellbeing; thinking about who might be hidden from everyday life, waiting for some simple, human contact to brighten their day is the Christian responsibility of all of us. It will take up our time. It will break up our busy lives. It will pull on our resources. But Jesus calls us to follow his example and step outside the crowds that surround us to find the person who is lonely, overlooked, excluded, shut out, unseen and unheard, and extend to them the hand of friendship.

Dr Anne Richards
National Adviser: mission theology
Mission and Public Affairs,
Church of England
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“… Jesus calls us to follow his example and step outside the crowds…”
I was spending the day with a rural vicar in Worcestershire. We were walking around one of the small communities he served when a woman emerged from a house, clutching a toddler and looking distraught. Her story quickly emerged. She and her partner had arrived in the parish a year or two previously, their relationship had broken down and he had left. The child was ill and needed a doctor; there was no bus and it was too far to walk. She knew nobody in the community and was hoping to get enough phone signal to contact her parents for help. In the end the situation was resolved and we were also able to point her to the weekly toddler group taking place in the church that afternoon.

A little while later I started to write about how people find, or fail to find, belonging in the countryside. I distinguished four ways in which people in the countryside appear to belong, with God and the church as well as in local society. We involve ourselves through:

1. Regular activities
2. Attending one off events
3. How we relate to people
4. Having special places

Belonging is a crucial aspect of being human, not least as its lack will often bring loneliness and isolation. This fourfold model lies at the heart of my book _God’s Belongers_ (Walker, 2017).

I was concerned that too often all country dwellers were assumed to have the same needs and aspirations for belonging, and that they would engage with God just as you or I would choose. I suspected that people who are very much at the centre of church life are not a cross-section of the wider population, but disproportionately those for whom a very strong component of how they belong is through joining in regular activities; things such as Holy Communion, study groups and serving on the PCC. If we imagine everyone else is like us, we will just put on more of such activities and be disappointed when they fail either to grow the church or serve the parish.

My study allowed me to begin to reflect on what the mission and role of the church might be in offering God’s love and welcome as widely as possible. As it progressed, I set out to write what became another chapter of my book. My intention was to describe how people with different ways of belonging could engage with the Five Marks of Mission to which the Church of England, as part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, is committed. Half way through writing, I realised that the central argument was going to be something quite different. I found I was describing how people who don’t come to church very often could work alongside those at the heart of the church community in the task of mission. They would be co-workers in the mission field, not passive recipients. I believe this analysis can help us think how to respond to loneliness and isolation in ways that meet the preferred ways of belonging of very different individuals.

**Regular activities**

We tend to be good at organising regular activities. Many rural churches and communities sustain a rhythm of pre-school groups, coffee mornings, WI branches, cricket clubs and the like. People who are natural joiners, who come along knowing that this might create an expectation they will come regularly, tend to find their way to them. Often there is quite a strong overlap between the people leading several such organisations in the same community. The harder challenge is to meet the needs of those who belong primarily in the other three ways.

**Attending one off events**

The core church members who commit regularly to things are often also good at putting on one-off events, from Christingle Services to Summer Fairs, litter clearing days to rallies for peace and justice. Those among the lonely who are scared of commitment may come as long as it’s ‘just this once’, and may then come along next time, even to something quite different.

**How we relate to people**

For the person for whom relationships are the strong component of belonging, the task of the church may be first to encourage those of its members who are similarly motivated to find ways to befriend those who appear lonely, and then to help them in turn to use that same natural inclination and preference to befriend others. It’s always possible to find an excuse, even in today’s society, to strike up a brief conversation with someone, and discover whether it is welcomed or not.
Having special places

A look at many local websites soon shows how the church is the iconic building of the place. Keeping it unlocked during the daytime, with leaflets advertising events and activities, can provide a place of welcome; so can having a rota of local people – not necessarily regular churchgoers – in the church at set, advertised hours of the week, ideally with tea, coffee and biscuits. Above all, let the church be used as often as possible, for as many different types of occasion as possible. Allow the community to feel the place really belongs to the whole village, not just to the congregation. We are less lonely in a place we feel is ours; more open to meeting and getting to know others who share in belonging there.

I don’t know what the toddler group to which we directed that lonely Worcestershire woman proved to be for her. If she belonged through taking part in regular activities, it could have been just the thing she needed. But perhaps what she really wanted was to find a friend or two, or to feel at home in a particular place or just to know there were events she could turn up to with no strings attached. Whichever it was, there were things the church could be part of with her that might strike at the heart of her isolation.

Rt Revd David Walker
Bishop of Manchester
@BishManchester

Bishop David’s book, God’s Belongers: How people engage with God today and how the church can help, is published by BRF; a review, written by Revd Elizabeth Clark, National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, is included in the Resources section of this edition of Country Way.
Each year, Mothers’ Union participates at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, in New York. In 2018 the focus will be on issues relating specifically to women in rural areas throughout the world; in preparation for this Mothers’ Union recently surveyed our membership to find out the views and experiences of those in rural contexts. Interestingly, members from a diverse range of countries, such as the UK, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania and South Africa, reported very similar experiences and concerns in addition to those unique to their own context.

Isolation is an experience common to women in rural communities around the world, many of whom face a lack of transport and access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and employment. Women are still disproportionately likely to undertake unpaid work and to care for children and older relatives; in rural settings full-time childcare can leave women particularly vulnerable to isolation while many feel an expectation on them to stay near their family home in order to look after ageing parents, limiting opportunities to seek employment or education further afield.

For some, ‘a village can become a prison’ particularly for those without access to their own car. Isolation is also a concern for older women, especially for those with poor health or for widows living alone.

While violence against women and girls affects both rural and urban communities around the world, isolation and lack of access to specialist services and support can place women in rural areas at increased risk. In the UK, two women are killed every week by a partner or former partner, and one in three women will experience some form of gender-based violence in her lifetime.

Whilst the challenges facing women in rural settings can seem bleak, it is important to remember that there are many individuals and organisations around the world providing support and calling for change. Mothers’ Union members offer a listening ear, provide practical support such as skills training, and campaigning for justice, calling on governments and decision-makers to address issues faced by women and girls around the world. Mothers’ Union exists in grassroots communities and seeks to combat loneliness and isolation by providing friendship and fellowship, acknowledging that rural communities can also be some of the most tight-knit, empowering and supportive networks available to women.

Rose Wright
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Rural isolation:
LOCAL AND GLOBAL

Mothers’ Union is a global Christian movement of over four million members in 83 countries. Our vision is of a world where God’s love is shown through healthy and flourishing relationships, and by challenging injustice. Our members are particularly concerned with the experiences of women around the world, calling for gender equality, tackling gender-based violence, and promoting women’s empowerment. Please see mothersunion.org for more information about our work.
Parish Nursing: good health and engaging community

Julia, a registered nurse and health visitor, has taken early retirement to focus on helping eleven small churches in North Devon reach out to those in the community with health needs. Her work involves:

- Encouraging self-care through the promotion of healthy lifestyles
- Education about managing a newly-diagnosed condition in order to prevent complications
- Helping people recover well after surgery or acute illness
- Visiting those who have long-term chronic conditions and need support with understanding their medication
- Accompaniment to a hospital appointment or signposting to appropriate NHS services
- Connecting with people who are nearing the end of life to ensure that they have peace and some quality of care in their last months

But Julia doesn’t just focus on physical or mental health. She also addresses issues of spiritual care: good relationships with others and with God, and hope, peace and a purpose for living. When people need and want to pray, Julia can pray with them. She also encourages them to attend events at their local church or community centre which will help to reduce their isolation.

The lack of health facilities in rural areas mean that she sees people of all ages; antenatal mums who don’t go to the available classes because they have to get two buses to attend; babies for weighing and professional advice at the Mums and Tots group; and isolated elderly people who are not regular church goers. She liaises with NHS staff and the hospital chaplain for referrals and training sessions, and she also links with the local farming community network.

Parish nurses often initiate, or are involved in, a holiday at home scheme. Aldeburgh’s Parish Nursing service initiated such a scheme with the help of other local churches and volunteers. Over the course of three consecutive days in August, older people come together for friendship, games, conversation, pampering, home-made goodies, entertainment, laughter and much more. There is one-to-one time, providing health assessments and treatments such as foot or hand massage. There are plenty of volunteers on hand each day to help and make sure all are included. These days lead to new friendships and some join more regular projects such as the lunch clubs. Many have said it is the highlight of their year and are usually asking in January about the next one!

The Campaign to End Loneliness (campaigntoendloneliness.org) quotes a variety of research that links loneliness to health problems, both mental and physical, and parish nurses are well placed to address both of these. Jessica, based in Suffolk, runs a weekly social activity for people with mental health problems, and one man travels ten miles on a bus to get to it. Often there are social problems to be sorted out, or support is needed for those looking to get back to work. Sometimes they come with physical health problems and Jessica will advise on those, accompanying them to hospital or doctor’s appointments if necessary. Jessica has a team of volunteers who will provide transport when needed, as the hospital is 25 miles away.

Parish Nursing Ministries UK helps churches develop parish nursing services, and trains and supports nurses with resources for practice and professional supervision. To find out more, go to parishnursing.org.uk.

Rvd Helen Wordsworth
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parishnursing.org.uk
The Campaign to End Loneliness reports that ‘rural areas have a unique set of circumstances that can exacerbate the social isolation of older residents, leading to poor health, loss of independence and lower quality of life’. Linking Lives UK is a Christian charity founded in 2012 which works across the UK to address issues of isolation and loneliness among older people through regular home visits.

Using a tried and tested model of home visiting and befriending which started in Berkshire in 1998, we work alongside churches and Christian organisations of all denominations to enable similar schemes to be set up elsewhere. As churches are often one of only a small number of organisations in rural communities, they are likely to be a crucial means through which isolated older people can be reached and supported. We provide all the training and support necessary to set up and maintain visiting schemes and there are now twenty projects operating in the UK.

Since October 2016, one rural partnership has been running through St James’ Church in the Forest of Dean. The co-ordinator, Louise MacLay, acknowledges that her biggest challenge relates to the remoteness of those being visited and the limited availability of community and public transport and is inspired by the willingness of her volunteers to travel long distances to visit local older people.

Brian regularly visits Peter (not their real names), a commitment requiring a 16 mile round trip to reach him at the end of a remote country lane. Within six weeks, a genuine friendship had formed and Peter felt proud to be a part of Linking Lives. Following a review of these visits, Louise recognised that Peter would benefit from additional equipment to help with his mobility and an Occupational Therapist was contacted to arrange this. At the same time, a District Nurse was asked to assess some other health concerns and a barber agreed to carry out home visits to cut his hair. This all resulted in Peter’s confidence improving and he has started to visit garden centres with Brian.

A new Linking Lives befriending scheme requires a local coordinator who can give around seven hours a week to the project, either as a volunteer or on a paid basis. This co-ordinator liaises with older people and volunteers, provides administrative support for the project and works with a team of five volunteer visitors.

Older people are reached locally through health or social care workers, family members or directly through individuals themselves. Local projects then recruit volunteers who commit to a weekly or fortnightly home visit for one or two hours, and may eventually arrange for trips out to places of interest. These visits often provide a lifeline to older people, particularly in rural areas where access to transport is extremely restricted.

Working with churches and Christian agencies in this way means that we can work holistically, sharing God’s love in a way which meets people’s physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs.

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Book reviews:
- God’s Belongers
- A Discipling Presence
- Come, Let Us Age!

Resources:
- Rural Isolation and Loneliness Resource
- Beer Mat Mentoring
- Shoreline Conversations
- Faith Rediscovered
The Rural Pastoral Support Network Project began in the summer of 2014, following initial research carried out by Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre into rural isolation across the UK.

The research found that isolation and loneliness can have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of people of all ages and backgrounds including older people, parents, carers, children and young people. Significant contributory factors include work or childcare commitments, lack of transport, and being housebound.

It was also recognised that there were likely to be many people in local communities with time and experience that could be used to contribute to addressing these issues, but initiatives and processes needed to be put in place.

This resource provides practical guidance for rural churches on how they can help address isolation and loneliness within their communities. It provides some case studies, details of good practice and links to other sources of information. There is a summary of the wider background relating to rural isolation in the UK, outlines of the process and findings of the project, and conclusions and recommendations which might be helpful for rural churches.

You can download the resource at germinate.net/mission/practical-resource-on-rural-isolation.

BOOK REVIEWS

A DISCIPLING PRESENCE

Methodist Publishing 2017
ISBN 978 1 85852 4429

The eagerly anticipated A Discipling Presence does not disappoint. Just as the Presence (2004) workbook was such a valued publication for the rural church so A Discipling Presence promises to be an equally valuable and much-used resource in the years ahead.

The book is written by contributors who are passionate about the sustainability and flourishing of the rural church. These are writers who understand the needs, challenges and opportunities that face our rural congregations and communities. Each chapter can stand alone so this is a resource that can be used in many different situations and a variety of ways, and are easily accessible. Every chapter is a mixture of background context, Biblical reflection, questions to think about and exercises to undertake. All of these are grounded in real life stories from rural communities and churches.

The whole of A Discipling Presence has as its backdrop a desire to deepen discipleship and enable people to join in with God’s mission. I have no hesitation in recommending this publication as one whose pages will be well thumbed in the coming years.

Revd Peter Ball
Director of Church Resource Development, Westminster College, Cambridge

COME, LET US AGE!

Wanda Nash
BRF
ISBN 978 0 85746 5580

This is a small book – less than 100 pages – but the subject matter is huge: how to approach ageing and dying gracefully and with joy. Wanda Nash, a well-known writer on stillness and contemplation, began this book in her late 70s. While she was writing it she was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

The book meets the subjects of ageing and death head on; both are to be embraced. Wanda doesn’t duck the problems of getting old but looks at them differently, suggesting that if we can no longer rush about filling our days with doing then we must make the most of being. That being takes place in the presence of a God who helps us to not only make sense of what is happening but to use it to minister to others. Ageing is to be embraced and celebrated.

A book like this could be very worthy and dull but instead it is suffused with a sense of fun and enjoyment of life. Even at the worst moments she sees an opportunity to play. Wanda is convinced of the reality of life after death and is ‘looking forward to the other side’, believing, like Julian of Norwich, that:

‘All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.’

This is an inspiring, challenging but comforting book.

Revd Elizabeth Clark
National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches
In this challenging book, David Walker, Bishop of Manchester, argues that people belong to their community and to church in different ways. Some belong through activities and are often regular churchgoers and office holders in the church and other community groups. Some belong through the relationship they have with a key person in the church, the sort of person everyone knows and likes. This person helps others to relate to God.

For some the thought of committing to worship every Sunday is either impossible or not helpful, and so attending one-off events is their way of belonging. Others feel a sense of belonging to the building itself; while it can be easy to dismiss this as worshipping the building, often it is the building that speaks to them of God.

In God's Belongers these ways of belonging are offered as a framework within which we might consider how to shape and focus the mission of the church beyond 'people like us'. So often mission is based around the things that those already in the church are comfortable with. Walker challenges us to look at how we can do things differently so that other ways of belonging can be welcomed and accommodated, and people can grow in faith.

In short, this book encourages us to look seriously at those not like us so that we can welcome them. It also challenges us to learn from others because 'the evidence we've found of a rich and complex pattern of belonging challenges the often implicit assumption that occasional churchgoers are “nominal” Christians'.

While God's Belongers inevitably reflects Bishop David's Anglican perspective, his insights are more widely applicable and easy to translate for other denominational contexts.

Revd Elizabeth Clark
National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches
SHORELINE CONVERSATIONS
shorelineconversations.com

Shoreline Conversations provides resources, training and support to those who wish to establish and develop graceful, spiritual conversation in groups.

Through it we seek to:
- Enrich the life of local Christian communities
- Encourage the sharing of life and faith between different Christian traditions
- Enhance and promote wider exploration of the spiritual dimension to life

To this end we offer:
- Beautifully crafted conversation packs exploring different aspects of chosen spiritual themes.
- Learning and development opportunities for those who wish to facilitate conversation groups.
- Bespoke projects and resources in collaboration with sponsoring organisations.
- Leadership mentoring for those who wish to develop this quality of conversation in their life and work.

For details of our current Conversations, visit shorelineconversations.com.

RESOURCE REVIEW

FAITH REDISCOVERED
cpo.org.uk

Helping older people find faith.

This resource is very attractively presented and would be easy to use.

It is good to see a resource written for older people that takes note of their past experience. The idea of five half-hour sessions, which could be part of a more social gathering is also a good model for rural areas. Session 2 – ‘What is God like?’ – is particularly good at unpacking unhelpful images of God which some of our older people may have grown up with.

However, this is written from a specific theological viewpoint which not everyone may find helpful or agree with. The final session, ‘Is Death the End?’, would need to be handled carefully and sensitively as it could raise some difficult pastoral issues.

Revd Elizabeth Clark
National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches
There is little worse than someone telling you that they know what it’s like to be in your shoes, when you know they have no idea at all. On the other hand, finding someone who genuinely understands is like discovering lost treasure. This is how I have felt on the journey I have taken since my wife started to show signs that she was no longer coping mentally. We have no children and no other relatives live nearby. I felt on my own, and my GP, though sympathetic, was unable to offer any support at that stage.

Over the following months, I watched the symptoms get worse, but still there was little help. When tested she showed only marginal signs of dementia. She is an intelligent woman, capable of covering up her weaknesses. What I needed to know, apart from confirming my fears, was how her condition was going to impact on me and on the Christian ministry in which I am engaged. My wife is, of course, my first concern, but there are many others that depend upon me. But there were no signposts that I could find, and I felt isolated.

Dementia often affects moods and sometimes the ability to comprehend relationships. This is not the same as not recognising someone you should know (often a sad consequence of advanced dementia); it is about understanding why they are in your life. I could no longer take for granted that this was my wife with whom I shared a life of love. In many ways, my wife had disappeared, and I have had to learn how to develop and sustain a loving relationship with this changed and changing woman.

More than a year after the first signs she was referred to a memory clinic and given a brain scan. She has now been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease. For over 40 years I have had the blessing of a wife who was truly the perfect help to me and to my ministry. Now that help has gone. Sometimes even the simplest of administrative tasks, such as putting items into envelopes is too confusing. The person who has been such a wonderful help now needs help, but does not always realise it.

I am slowly discovering the various resources that are available to carers, but all these have to be sought. It would be wonderful if GPs had packs they could hand out with all the information, or some other single source of information was available. Through the Alzheimer’s Society I have discovered a monthly support group. I could have wept through the first meeting as the sense of isolation was lifted. I found myself surrounded by fifteen other men and women who genuinely understood my isolation. Together we shared our experiences, with those further down the road offering encouragement to those of us just learning.

But although we are now finding some support, watching the woman I love slowly vanish out of my life is painful and makes me feel lonely. Some days we can laugh and enjoy things together, but other days are just a mess as the reality that is in her mind collides with the reality of what might be called normal life. When my wife’s condition makes her feels that no one understands her – especially me, and I cannot get through – we are both left feeling isolated and lonely. I can speak kindly, and perhaps she will let me give her a hug or kiss. I hope somehow that will touch her soul. Then I retreat into writing my private blog, as it seems that this outlet and my time with God are the only places I feel free to share how I really feel.

Anonymous
Belonging becomes believing

More than 4,000 children contacted Childline in the past year because they were lonely.* At the other end of the age spectrum, elderly people are also suffering from loneliness and isolation. According to Linking Lives UK, there are 1.8 million people over 75 in the UK who are profoundly lonely.

HOPE's dream is of a growing church, showing Jesus' love and telling the Jesus story at the heart of every village, town and city. Psalm 68 says God 'sets the lonely in families' and churches are playing a significant role in combatting isolation in every community.

Churches across the spectrum of denominations are working together with HOPE towards 2018 and a whole year of mission in words and action to make Jesus known. The Talking Jesus research (talkingjesus.org), which HOPE commissioned together with the Church of England and the Evangelical Alliance, shows that one in five of the people we talk to about Jesus is open to knowing more. So HOPE is encouraging every Christian to pray specifically for five friends or family members, and to have something to say, something to give and an invitation to offer.

But, often Christians avoid talking about Jesus with non-Christian friends and someone who comes along to church to avoid loneliness might never find faith for themselves if there is not an intentional invitation for them to respond to Jesus.

The Talking Jesus research showed that two-thirds (67%) of non-Christian adults, and more than half (55%) of young people, say they know a Christian. We asked this group whether the active Christian they know has ever talked with them about their faith in Jesus Christ. Four in 10 (41%) of these adults told us that the Christian they know has never spoken with them about Jesus. And half (48%) of these non-Christian 11-18 year olds have not heard about Jesus from the Christian they know.

Roy Crowne, HOPE's executive director, says, ‘We need to be intentional in making Jesus known: intentional about talking to friends, family and others about Jesus, intentional about inviting them to church events, and intentional about providing opportunities for people to hear the gospel and respond.’

That intentionality can combat isolation, and ultimately, can lead to people of all ages becoming part of the solution to the loneliness crisis.

Unconditional love

In Meads, a village on the edge of Eastbourne, the parish church is working to combat loneliness in its community. At one end of the age spectrum, isolated elderly people come together in the village hall for a coffee club, where a volunteer expert runs a computer clinic once a month, and a hearing aid specialist is on hand some weeks to solve problems for the hard of hearing. A series of interesting talks at a Cameo club for women and regular men’s breakfasts keep connections going throughout the year. The club and the breakfast are events to bring friends to, who might otherwise be lonely.

But this isn’t just a church-based WI or Rotary Club. As well as openings to talk

* bbc.com/news/uk-39580234
about faith in everyday conversations, occasional, more overtly Christian talks can lead to an invitation to a church service. The Christians in the group offer to pray about issues that are troubling club members.

Roy Crowne says, ‘If we are to be more than just a social club, we need to be intentional about making Jesus known, loving and caring unconditionally, but making the most of every opportunity to point people to Jesus, giving a reason for the hope we have.’

Belonging and believing

At the other end of the age spectrum, it is the same with the parish toddler group. Parents wanting their children to gain a place at the church school attend the toddler group and bring their children to church on Sundays. The parents are happy to take a turn on a crèche rota and helping in Sunday school, but the church’s families worker realised that some of them had had no opportunities to develop a living faith of their own.

In some churches that might exclude them from belonging to the children’s workers’ team. But in this context, the families worker invited them to join a special home group just for the children’s workers. One mum, who had been part of the team for years, admitted that she had never been in a context where lay people prayed out loud. Her only Bible knowledge had come from her preparation for children’s church. But in the context of this special home group, she came to faith. Belonging became believing.

Rhythm of mission

Churches can play a crucial role linking lives. A village church can be the glue that holds a community together, but sometimes a special focus can give the people we are connected with the opportunity to respond to Jesus for themselves.

HOPE has devised a rhythm of mission through the church year to keep the mission momentum going. Seasons of prayer at New Year, Lent, Pentecost and Ascension – drawing on initiatives such as Thy Kingdom Come – can lay a foundation. Seasonal events and activities in the summer and at harvest – including Germinate’s Rural Mission Sunday initiative each July – can help us build bridges through acts of service as varied as clearing up a community’s waste ground to holding a summer street party or a karaoke evening in the village pub. Christianity Explored or Alpha courses can give people the space they need to ask questions. Then special guest services at Easter and Christmas create space in which people can respond.

‘Often it’s not about doing more, but it’s about our focus,’ says Roy. ‘We need to focus on the people in our village, town or city who don’t yet know Jesus, inviting them to be part of the church family, loving and serving them unconditionally and taking every opportunity to introduce them to Jesus.

To find out more about HOPE Revolution and HOPE 2018, sign up at hopetogether.org.uk/signup to receive regular news updates.

Catherine Butcher
Communications Director, HOPE
The robin landed on the table and looked around. It helped itself to some bread from the plate before flying off, then returned for more, almost oblivious to the young people sat watching. Gathered in the outdoor chapel, the group were invited to reflect on all they had heard and experienced during the weekend away, and what this meant as they returned home. Given the option to go forward to eat bread and drink juice, soon around twenty young people crowded round the small table, to eat and drink remembering Him. Together, they brought their enthusiasm, energy, tiredness, hopes and fears, and in that moment we caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Residential work with young people can have a significant impact on their faith and personal development. For those living in rural communities the benefits can be huge as individuals build friendships with others who share their day-to-day experiences: the challenges, joys and frustrations of living in village communities, distanced from the critical mass of their peers living in nearby towns with much easier access to a wider range of opportunities, activities, and support. These relationships grow beyond the residential as the young people create opportunities to connect and meet up on a more regular basis.

However, this way of making connections are often the exception for most young people. Social media, designed to bring people together, can all too often have the opposite effect. Young people in more isolated communities can find themselves observing from a distance the lives and activities of their more geographically connected peers, often ending up with the perception that they are missing out.

This year the media has been full of reports of the rise in mental health issues amongst young people. Support services are often based in larger population centres and are consequently much more difficult to access for young people without easily accessible transport (public or private). If there is no-one nearby to talk to, the sense of isolation is exacerbated.

While the challenges facing young people in rural contexts are complex, the responses of local churches need not be. By creating safe spaces in our communities where young people are acknowledged, listened to and understood, where they can play and be themselves without judgment, we can demonstrate that they are not on their own.

As Mark Yaconelli says in Contemplative Youth Ministry:

“When a young person is seen they feel valued. When they are heard, they feel respected. When someone is moved by their situation, they feel loved. When they receive kindness, they feel cared for. And when others delight in their existence they sense the very breath of God.”

Sharing bread and juice around a picnic table on a residential might have lacked the order and discipline of a good old British queue, but it was filled with spontaneity, fun, peace, joy and laughter. Most importantly, there was always room for one more.

Phil Simpson
Germinate Trustee & former youth worker
philsim2@gmail.com
Farming isolation: a personal perspective

Susan Atkinson, a farmer in Leicestershire, reflects on her first-hand experience of farming isolation.

Our farm is situated between three villages. When I first met my husband in the 1970s all three villages still contained working farms; now there is only one farm left, plus a couple of ‘retired’ farmers who still keep a few animals.

The 1970s saw huge changes in British farming. Farms became bigger in an effort to become more cost effective and farmers who had valiantly worked all hours to feed this country during the last war were perceived by some as inefficient and unnecessary. As these farmers retired their farms were sold, often with land and housing disposed of separately. The UK agricultural workforce declined by half between 1960 and 2010.

At the same time, though more houses were being built in the villages they were occupied by commuters who often preferred to shop at supermarkets as they were cheaper. As a result, village shops had fewer and fewer customers until they became uneconomic and closed. Only one village near our farm still has a shop in it.

Some of the newcomers had an unrealistic idea of the countryside being ‘quiet’ and objected to hearing machinery working into the night, being near buildings full of animals or finding themselves held up on the roads as those animals were being moved from field to field. With new houses being built on farmland, some of our farmer friends even moved to other parts of the country.

Some families had lived in the villages for several generations, as the gravestones in the churchyards testify, but now these old families have mostly gone and the commuters that replaced them often stay only a few years before moving on. So local farmers know fewer and fewer people in the area and feel they have little in common with those who have moved into the villages.

The pressures on farmers and farming continue to be felt. Striving for economies of scale mean farmers spend longer tending animals or cultivating fields, ruling out time for other pursuits. Children that might have taken over farms from their parents are encouraged to seek careers elsewhere so they can have a better standard of living. Rising levels of bureaucracy create multiple challenges including trying to keep up with the apparently endless rules and regulations and completing forms online even if the internet connection is poor or even non-existent. Penalties for making even small mistakes are all too often a reduction in the amount the farmer receives or even a complete stoppage of payment. Even climate change and the impact of increasingly changeable weather is adding to the stress farmers are experiencing and their feelings of isolation.

Farming support charities are facing bigger workloads every year as farmers are always near the top of suicide figures and isolation is a large part of the problem. The next few years are likely to be turbulent, particularly as the implications of Brexit for Britain’s farming community are gradually revealed. It is highly unlikely that the feelings of isolation will lessen or that there will be any easy solutions to the problem.

Susan Atkinson

Farming Help:
03000 111 999
(7am-11pm)
farminghelp.co.uk
HEALTHY TOGETHERNESS IN MESSY CHURCH

Readers will no doubt be aware of the famous maxim ‘it takes the whole village to raise the child’. While we instinctively associate this principle with educating the next generation, the health and well-being of each one of us – of whatever age – needs the love and care of a ‘family’ of significant others if we are to flourish and become the best we can be.

The all-age value of Messy Church is founded on this very principle. Insisting that children should not come without an adult doesn’t simply address safeguarding issues, important as they are. It is rather in the very DNA of Messy Church that old and young explore faith and become Christian together.

Recent research among young people in the Church of England who have held onto their faith into their early 20s reveals that one of the key factors in this has been the relationships they have with older members of their churches. Similar research from the States bears out the truth that not only does it take the whole church to raise a child but the whole church has a vital role to play in nurturing faith in each one of us. Children need to see that faith lasts and is still relevant and lively right on into ripe old age; in the same way those of us who are older need the inspiration and encouragement of seeing God at work in our children, young people and grandchildren.

The writer of Psalm 68 tells us that ‘God has set the lonely in families’. Isolation and loneliness are pressing problems today, particularly in some rural communities and so a Messy Church family of honorary parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles and siblings is not only fertile ground for nurturing faith but also just the sort of life-giving community that is needed by those who are, for a variety of reasons, estranged or far from blood relations.

Messy Church is not simply about reaching new people with the Gospel but also about reimagining how we do church as a Christ-centred, all-age community that welcomes the last, the lost, the least…and the lonely.

‘No man is an island entire of itself’ wrote John Donne. For many people, of course, a lack of transport facilities, mobility or money, ill-health, bereavement or a sense of being different can leave people feeling as cut off from the rest of humanity as Shetlanders in midwinter storms or the residents of Sark in the fog.

Some people choose to move to the country for the isolation and for them the glorious peace and solitude can be a liberation. But for those who have not chosen their situation, the solitude of rural life can be more like solitary confinement.

I remember an older, widowed woman in church, grabbing me by the arm during the clear-up after a particularly frenetic Messy Church session. ‘My dear,’ she said, pulling me – with surprising strength – down to her diminutive height:

‘I want you to know: I love coming to Messy Church. People are very kind and visit me at home, but quite often I’m on my own and being here with all this life and all these young people is just what I need.’

Her words stuck with me because I found them so surprising. Messy Church is noisy and, while very structured, often presents as chaotic which some older people find hard to deal with. But, evidently, the contrast was what she needed.

Another older man described his objections to his local church building a separate room to contain the children during services:

‘At home, I’m pretty much silent all week,’ he said. ‘I like the children making some noise on a Sunday, otherwise I might as well worship on my own.’

Hampshire County Council’s report Social Isolation and Loneliness in Hampshire 2016-2019 identifies a wide range of groups at risk of isolation and loneliness: children and young people, new mothers, carers of all ages, people above 65, those who are homeless or on a low income, LGBTI groups and, perhaps surprisingly, working-age men.

The local church is far more than a building; it’s primarily a connected community of people who have a bigger reason for coming together than simply a shared interest. As each church seeks to reflect who Jesus is to the local community, it fosters relationships, looking not only upwards to God but outwards to welcome new people and inwards to care for those already in the circle. It is a vital bridge between one human being and another, a family for the least, the last and the lost, where islands can be linked to the mainland.

Strategies like Messy Church can make it easier for people who may be undergoing a temporary or longer-lasting sense of isolation to make that first, vital, life-giving connection with their local church. However, what makes the most difference isn’t the form of church we use, but rather the Christ-like hospitality in each person’s welcome.

Lucy Moore
Founder and team leader, Messy Church
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messychurch.org.uk

Martyn Payne

Messy Church in rural communities

Messy Vintage

A missional offshoot of Messy Church, Messy Vintage has been developed for people in the second half of life. If some volunteers are 50-plus and those attending are in their 80s, 90s and even 100s that’s four or five decades of what you might call ‘all age’ worship!

The idea began in Philadelphie, a village outside St Helier, Jersey, and more pilots are now taking place in several parts of the UK including at a care home in Holybourne, Hampshire. Just like the more familiar Messy Church, Messy Vintage finishes with a meal, usually a slap-up tea or, if taking place in a care home, with grace before residents depart for lunch in their dining room.

Key to Messy Vintage...

- It enables older people know they are part of something bigger
- It’s about being a blessing to, and being blessed by, others
- Themes each month may be repeated across all the regular Messy Churches and Messy Vintage services in the same area
- Worship often releases the voice of older people; this is church for the voiceless
- Wherever it takes place it is about a church creating sacred space where people are
- The food should be as special and beautiful as the people involved are special and beautiful
Rural Mission

MESSY RAMBLINGS: stories from rural Messy Churches

County Durham
Anne Offler, Durham Messy Church Regional Coordinator

Messy Church gatherings in rural contexts are mostly small but perfectly formed, with an amazing sense of community!

Making a meal is a real challenge so extra time needs to be spent enabling churches to understand why the meal is important and how it builds hospitality, fellowship and friendship. In circumstances where only cake and tea are possible, churches are encouraged to ensure people sit down and spend time together as if they were having a big meal.

Children are more used to the natural world and content with everyday crafts and activities needing less ‘high tech’ stimulation. They seem more ready to help one another, which may reflect the fact that many rural schools have mixed-aged classes. One of the Dales schools has a total of 9 children aged 4-11, so supporting one another and working collaboratively is the norm.

Rural Messy Churches can often be quite ecumenical. In one Messy Church the Methodist, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches work together and it is well supported by the Church Councils and congregations. There are also many Methodist/Anglican Messy Church partnership.

A Messy Church Nativity Sheep Trail was held in a couple of the Dales villages where a small number of shops, the library, craft centre, pub, church vestry and even the windows of some homes hosted knitted sheep. People of all ages were invited to hunt for the sheep and discover the real meaning of Christmas. The trail became a serious topic of conversation with the young and the old. A couple of elderly ladies were helped up from the pavement as they struggled to read the name of the sheep on a low windowsill in the butchers shop! The trail brought the community together and all were invited to the carol service to celebrate.
Herefordshire
Kathy Bland, Herefordshire Messy Church Regional Coordinator

I love arriving in a tiny village and finding that there is a thriving Messy Church. Our Messy Church congregations can be a significant percentage of the population in a small village. Some of our Herefordshire villages have a total population of under 300, so to have 20 people coming to Messy Church is big news. Messy Church can be the only family-friendly activity in a village, which means it can have a big impact in a small, rural community.

Our smaller Messy Churches can often manage to tell Godly Play style stories or to include a very reflective prayer activity more easily than larger ones. I went to a Messy Church where about 15 people very quietly shared bread and wine, passing it from one person to another. It was really powerful. Quiet listening can sometimes be a struggle for large Messy Churches, but in small gatherings we can hear God’s voice clearly.

Cumbria
Syl Hunt, Cumbria Messy Church Regional Coordinator

Living in a rural area is beautiful and can be very peaceful although the downside can be the road system. Families sometimes have to journey many miles to reach a Messy Church and it can be quite off-putting when there is no easy direct route or the weather is bad. It all adds to the feeling of isolation. This results in less frequent attendance for lots of families. It becomes harder and harder to build on friendships made at Messy Church. But we persevere and make sure that the welcome is warm each time they come.

One Messy Church here in Cumbria is a partnership between a group of four churches who share one vicar. The churches are some distance apart so they hold their Messy Church at one of the four churches each month. The families won’t travel to the other churches, only the nearest, so consequently numbers can be low.

We keep in touch by email or send ‘we missed you’ cards and a short outline of what we did that month and include the take home idea. We let them know that they will always be welcome.
For the fourth year running, groups of Year 5 children from eight primary schools in the Eden Valley in Cumbria, plus their teachers and parent chauffeurs, made a unique Easter Journey through Langwathby Methodist Church. Gazebos transformed the church into a sequence of locations beginning on the dusty road into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The children were immersed in the events of a week in which Jesus Christ encountered acclaim and opposition, friendship and hostility.

They were invited to consider what kind of king it is who rides humbly into the city on a donkey, yet overturns the tables of the traders in the Temple, angry at the sight of the poor being cheated in the place where they should have had the freedom to come and worship their God. The children became sheep and pigeon traders and money-changers in the Temple, vying with each other to trade with the worshippers coming to sacrifice at the Passover Festival. When Jesus turned over their stalls, what did they think of this king then?

What kind of king washes the feet of his followers before they share together the seder meal of the Last Supper but also gives them bread and wine (represented by a grape) that they might remember his body broken and blood shed as part of God’s new agreement of love with the men and women he created?

The children followed Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane and hid behind bushes whilst he prayed. They experienced the sounds of the night: the crunch of Roman soldiers’ boots, scuffles, sword fight, and Jesus sighing, ‘Not my will, but Yours’, as the disciples snored instead of keeping watch and heard the cock crow three times. What kind of king is this who refused to summon the armies of heaven to help him when he was betrayed by one of his own disciples but rather allowed himself to be led away by Roman soldiers to appear before King Herod and Pontius Pilate the Roman Governor? One who could not be found guilty of any crime, but was nailed to a cross to die. How do we understand the contradictions of such a king?

A clip from the animated film The Miracle Maker showed the crucifixion of Jesus. Everyone waited in stunned silence in the dark, claustrophobic space experiencing for themselves the uncertainty of Easter Saturday.

Among the fear and sadness, the delight and surprise of Easter morning is revealed to the children as they enter into the blazing glory of the Resurrection Garden, overflowing with spring flowers, plants and trees. Mary Magdalene sees the stone that had sealed the cave into which Jesus’ body had been laid, now rolled to one side, the grave clothes neatly folded. She hears that familiar voice: ‘Mary’. Jesus, alive, comes to her in a new Easter way and she is sent to tell his friends, ‘He is risen!’

Serious sadness and surprised delight. That is the joy of Easter that the children entered into. How can we hold the two together?

Finally the children contemplated the events they had witnessed, reflected on what it meant to them and considered why Christians have found the story important enough to return to it year after year for two millennia.

So many people from our churches offered their time, gifts and abilities to make this event possible and successful. A huge ‘Thank you’ is owed to all, as well as to the children who came and the schools who trusted the children to us on their Easter Journey.

Hazel Scott Bowes
The seed for this ministry was sown in me as I sat listening to Liz Ogborne speak at the 2016 Germinate Conference.

Liz was talking about Prayer Spaces in Schools (prayerspacesinschools.com), where they encouraged pupils to write a prayer on a cut-out of their hand and hang it on a tree as a way of praying. As Liz was talking I was grabbed by the idea and began to think how it might come to life where I live and minister. Vyrnwy Mission Area is in Powys, mid-Wales, consists of seven rural communities, their churches, people and outlying properties, and stretches from the village of Llansantffraid-yn-Mechain, close to the border with England in the east, to the community of Llanwddyn and Lake Vyrnwy in the west.

I was thinking about how we could translate Liz’s schools’ initiative to agricultural shows and other community events. Over the following months this seed was nurtured and shared with others in the Mission Area, and in time our Mobile Sacred Space/pop-up church project emerged. The ministry was officially launched when we gathered people from all seven churches together to celebrate Rural Mission Sunday on 30 July, a little after the ‘official’ date, but one which worked better for us!

In the five weeks following its launch, and in various incarnations, the space (affectionately known as ‘The Tent’ by those involved) visited Llanfyllin Show, Llwydiarth Summer Fair and Strawberry Tea, Llanfechain Show and Llanwddyn Folk Music Festival, providing visitors with the opportunity to write a prayer and hang it on the Prayer Tree. Children received a copy of the Bible Society’s book The Super Cool Story of Jesus, and all were enabled to find out a little more about the Mission Area and how we seek to be present in the communities we serve.

Having started with the approach that Liz shared at the conference, we have adapted the practicalities slightly to address and, hopefully, appeal to a wider age-profile by providing ready-made, pre-strung cut-outs of hands for prayers. We also distribute leaflets which explain who we are and how to contact us, and include prayers that people may like to use.

On each occasion people engaged with the space, writing prayers on a whole range of themes: for those who were President/Chair of the events to those dealing with septic tank issues, and everything in between! Those who helped run the project had some significant conversations with people. We were also able to offer welcome shelter from the rain when necessary, and simply enjoying being present at these events, talking with people and praying for those in our communities, providing the opportunity for people to encounter God and hear the good news of Jesus Christ. We believe it has helped us to engage with people in the locality – many of whom we wouldn’t usually encounter in any other setting – encouraging them to know that the church is there for all.

We thank God for all that happened as a result of this project this year, and are already making adjustments and plans for next!

R gev Hermione Morris
Vyrnwy Mission Area
St Asaph Diocese, Church in Wales
The Denby Dale Centre (DDC), a Fresh Expressions success story, is nestled next to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Although the Centre is most closely linked to the Clayton West and Denby Dale Methodist Church Circuit, it works closely with churches of all denominations in the area and has been running a series of projects to reduce loneliness and improving quality of life for the last twelve years.

The Centre runs a number of social activities under the banner Time Together; these include Memory Groups for people living with dementia, a film and food group, a games group, computer training, coffee mornings, cream teas and tea dances.

The charity also runs a programme of free public awareness events around such issues as dementia, arthritis, dying, deafness, doorstep crime, changing energy supplier, benefits checking and the Herbert Protocol, the police register of habits for people living with dementia. Future events include a rural volunteering fair and a grandparents event in 2018.

The Kirkburton Hub is the charity’s community centre, hosting six Time Together groups, five private sector groups and five community groups. Recently the DDC worked with the National Citizen Service to create a dementia friendly meeting room in the Kirkburton Hub along with a free advice leaflet, ‘Designing dementia friendly spaces’ (available from ddc.org.uk).

Linking local people with social activities and the community centre is DDC’s Valleys Community Transport which runs a programme of pre-planned trips where members can book a seat. The group hire facility supports thirty community groups to overcome transport barriers for their own charitable purposes. Valleys Community Transport has been instrumental in the development of a new network of charity minibus operators which will, through the sharing of best practice and assets, provide an improved transport service in the area.

DDC’s projects and services are run by an employed staff of six and a volunteer team of seventy, including activity assistants, drivers, cooks, shop assistants and drivers. It is governed by a board of 12 trustees, the majority members of the Methodist Church. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Jeanette Lodge, said, ‘We have an amazing team of volunteers who work so hard to achieve our charities aims. They have told me about the benefit of volunteering with us and the satisfaction they get from improving so many people’s lives’.

The Centre Manager, Paul Jones, said, ‘It is amazing listening to our users talk about the scale of impact of our services. The families of our users tell me how they are being positively affected by our groups. I am very proud to be working with such amazing people’.

If you would like to know more about the Denby Dale Centre, visit ddc.org.uk.
Eering: the Parish of Pilling

In 2014, Pilling St John the Baptist, in Morecambe Bay, was invited to be one of two parishes working with Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre on a project exploring rural isolation. Around twenty people from the local community, representing churches, charities, local business, and the parish council came together to highlight key issues facing the area and begin to identify potential solutions.

As a result of this project, Pilling parish church now runs a food bag scheme, a term chosen to distinguish the initiative from nearby ‘foodbanks’ which are more formal and occasionally a little admin-heavy. This is a simple, mercy-focused, scheme with drop off points for produce around the village. A volunteer from the village collects the produce and takes it to the church. Another volunteer bags the food up and ensures that there are a couple of bags, each containing a day’s food for a family, in the porch at all times. We don’t monitor how the service is used, but we do know that the food is going to those who really need it.

Other activities, including bereavement support, dementia awareness sessions, prayers for healing at the local pottery and the formation of a team of pastoral visitors have followed. These are all run by local volunteers and focus on local need. The latest initiative is Helping Hands, connecting volunteers from the local church with those who need help and support: transport for medical appointments, collection of shopping or prescriptions, or a lift to local church services. While we recognise that there will always be more that we can do, we are grateful that Germinate’s project gave us the kick-start we needed to start doing something about the isolation issues we all face.

Revd Andy Shaw
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Roaming disabled driver visits 650 Gloucestershire churches for Ride+Stride

On Saturday 9 September, Sarah Hargreave, a 73-year-old disabled driver from the Greenway Benefice near Cheltenham, completed a mission to visit all the churches in Gloucestershire. She combined a research project with a fundraising effort for the Gloucestershire Historic Churches Trust (GHCT).

Sarah began her epic journey on 1 January and completed the mission on the day of GHCT’s annual Ride+Stride event. Hundreds of people took part in the sponsored event, walking, cycling or driving between churches, raising money to help churches needing repairs or improvements. Many of Gloucestershire’s churches date back to Saxon and Norman times and the cost of their upkeep is a huge challenge for local congregations.

‘I’ve visited around 650 churches and seen how they’ve developed from Saxon and Norman times and the cost of their upkeep is a huge challenge for local congregations.

Sarah has driven through snow and fog and covered a huge mileage – much of it down single-track potholed lanes. Her car has needed three new tyres, and she has an unrivalled knowledge of the local toilet facilities around the county!

Ride+Stride County organiser Glenn Duff said:

‘We’re grateful to Sarah and the many other participants who stepped out in the sunshine and came back in the rain on Saturday. Thanks must go, too, to all our local organisers who have worked so hard. We hope even more will join us for next year’s Ride+Stride.’

For more information on organising a ‘Ride and Stride’ event, trail or to participate yourself, see: rideandstrideuk.org
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