

Mega-Parish Rural Benefices

A Consultation held at Weston Patrick, near Basingstoke on Wednesday 18th February 2009

Twenty-four members of the Hampshire Rural Group (HRG), met for this consultation. We are a network of practitioners in rural church ministry in the Dioceses of Portsmouth and Winchester, clergy and lay, meeting under the auspices of the Rural Theology Association. The Group wished to highlight to those involved in pastoral organisation both issues and reflections from their experience in rural benefices in both dioceses. Peter Dyson, rector of the newly formed North Downs benefice reflected on the experience of forming a benefice of twelve churches in eight parishes. Considering the cost borne by multi-parish clergy families, Lucy Kington offered a view of a clergy spouse. Not all members are yet persuaded that such large configurations are necessary: some that are concerned about their implementation and sustainability. From these observations and the discussion they stimulated, we suggest the following points should be borne in mind in rural pastoral reorganisation.

“How far can love be stretched?”

The benefice exists to present and make flesh and word God's love for the small part of the world which it covers. Any restructuring of its shape and ministry must remain faithful to this basic task. (Cf 'Turning the Sod', ACORA 1995, p3). The institution must serve the mission and the pastoral task. Looking at mega-parish benefices, how far can love be stretched – in the discussions, in the process of bringing together? What are our responsibilities towards each other?

1. **'Minster Model' Not Appropriate.** We strongly argue that, although the “Minster Model” of urban-rural connection has a distinguished history, it is inadequate as a basis on which to build a modern benefice. It is an answer to a question which is not being asked any more. The modern countryside has a vigour, self-confidence and assurance of its status which the medieval countryside did not enjoy. The danger is that, while ministers from the urban context enjoy their engagement with the countryside, the rural parishes easily feel patronised and threatened. Sometimes this happens from inside, when active ex-(sub)urban incomers view the rural parish as 'weak' and cause friction (usually unintentionally) with long-term village people, by failing to understand the culture. When some of the rural parishes see the town as their 'saviour' they are being unrealistic. If it is presumed that the role of the urban parish is to resource and energise the smaller siblings, this ignores the gulf between rural and urban church-view, size, expectations and theological ethos. The needs and focus of a parish of, say, 5000 is very different from a parish of 500, let alone 100. The context is simply too diverse on which to construct a cohesive benefice. At the root of the, in our view, misleading perceptions of rural churches, is that they are only weak or failing versions of what a church ought to be – a town church.
2. **Sociological Coherence.** Related to the previous comment: benefices need to be sociologically coherent, probably around the gravitational pull of the same large town (though not in the Minster Model sense). There needs to be a match and balance between parishes in the proposed new benefice. If this is impossible, careful attention needs to be offered to the 'misfit': there is a reason why it behaves as the naughty child. Parishes that are neighbours do not necessarily get on well enough to work together, for a variety of reasons.
3. **Complex Benefice Histories.** The diocese needs to ensure that it fully understands and represents the history and complexity of parishes within rural benefices to incoming incumbents. In the rural context at present it is unrealistic to discount the power of the meaning of the parish and parish church to parishioners and the continuing influence of historical events, particularly rivalry and 'hurts' between parishes and with the diocese. While the need to recognise these factors may be deplored within Christian discourse, in our experience to ignore them is unwise. It has been suggested that parishes within a benefice can be like a dysfunctional family: it takes some skill to understand exactly how dysfunctional.
4. **Damaging Relationships.** In any benefice reorganisation there may be some damaging battles. Smaller parishes feel threatened, thinking the new benefice arrangement is the first step towards redundancy. Relationships which there was not time to build up adequately with the new incumbent are easily damaged in the work to bring the enlarged benefice through labour to birth. Problems have to be solved without relationships of trust because of the sheer complexity and number of meetings. The incoming incumbent may be seen as an agent of the diocese rather than the local advocate and friend: will that enhance or undermine the ministry offered? How can relationships which facilitate change be built positively when personal resources are spread ever thinner?
5. **Money and Parish Rivalry.** Rivalries and disquiet are often expressed in attitudes to Parish Share allocation. Parishes served by a House-for-Duty priest may demand to be assessed on that lower amount, rather than accept financial responsibility for the whole ministry stipendiary and non-stipendiary. While relationships and trust are being built in the new benefice, it is an extra and very difficult burden to have to negotiate parish share allocation. Perhaps Deanery and Diocese should offer some initial financial rebate for benefices in the process of formation, reducing over years?

6. **Mega-Parish Priesthood Less Satisfying.** If it is love of being a parish priest which takes people into ministry, above a certain number of parishes the quality of this changes and the role becomes personally and vocationally less satisfying, more 'fire-fighting' and administrative. Almost inevitably, mega-parish benefices lead the incumbent from a vision of growth to a concentration on church maintenance. One incumbent reportedly prays to God every night not to have a vision.
7. **Overwhelmed by Administration.** The combined weight of administration, personal and benefice, within a mega-parish set up, needs to be addressed. It is possible only to hold a certain amount of competence together. It was felt that while volunteers might undertake some mechanical tasks (photocopying, for example), there was need for a paid professional administrator, not least because of confidentiality. There should be automatic allowance in the Parish Share allocation to recognise this need, without having to fight additional battles within the benefice to get it provided out of local church funds. The wider church really must as a matter of urgency simplify the burden of administration – perhaps devising an entity short of a united parish to reduce the numbing requirements.
8. **Lay Leadership Issues.** People want a 'face to the church': the village parson, not necessarily clergy. Lay leadership can be accepted and indeed welcomed, especially if it enhances the service programme for smaller churches. The previous HRG consultation of October 2005 noted the need to promote and encourage the role of readers in a very mixed economy of service leadership and preaching. When you can lead a Service and preach after two month's training, why study for three years? Such problems of different ministries meshing together are more likely to be raised in mega-parish benefices.
9. **Define Sustainability.** The concept of 'sustainability' needs to be clarified when offered as the reason for change and reorganisation. The vagueness of the concept causes concern. Does it mean financial, clergy supply, environmental sustainability, or some combination of these or indeed other elements? The measures of pastoral sustainability need to have been researched rigorously, the time-frame defined, to be openly explainable and have wide assent.
10. **Supporting and Resourcing.** The diocesan authorities and other rural clergy need to ensure that a priest who is asked to take on work of this magnitude is both supported and resourced with suitable training and mentoring before, at the beginning of and during changes. Perhaps the HRG itself could be recognised as being a source of rural expertise, though the Group, as it is only a network, would need to look carefully as to how it could be delivered. While the wisdom of experience is transferrable, it is also the case that each individual benefice history and configuration is unique and needs to be recognised as such. Even more use must be made of the Arthur Rank Centre training and resources as a matter of policy.
11. **The Cost of Ministry.** We also asked who is bearing the personal cost of the changes towards mega-parish benefices. There are a number of possible answers.
 - a. **A few outstandingly able clergy-pioneers:** how would any priest know that they were capable of running a multi-parish benefice? How can those who do not think they are so qualified say no honourably, should they be approached? How is the churches' responsibility to those who cannot do such work to be fulfilled: are they in some sense failures, or simply clergy with a different vocation which should be respected?
 - b. **Other clergy colleagues** facing the fear and anxieties which such change evokes both within themselves and among their people.
 - c. **The lay people of the parishes:** for them they are potential gains in a greater fulfilment of their baptismal ministry, but also a sense that they are losing something which had been regarded locally as precious.
 - d. **The people who feel marginalised:** those of the smaller parishes especially.
 - e. **Clergy spouse and family:** the potential loneliness and isolation of the spouse is increased because of the number of meetings which grows with the number of parishes. It is necessary (and not undesirable, as once taught) to have friends within the parishes. While rural living is attractive, it is more expensive and, particularly with growing children, requires of parents considerable transport mobility. Negative comments about arrangements are sometimes directed through the spouse to the vicar.
 - f. **A Deanery** unbalanced by having a benefice itself the size of a small deanery among its members.
 - g. **The Diocese:** with more clergy in such positions where they are unable to offer much beyond the boundaries of their benefice, and where as a consequence relationships are weakened or unable to grow.