

## Towards a Theology of Pastoral Reorganisation in Rural Areas

*Synopsis: This paper argues that theology has a contribution to make to the discussion of pastoral reorganisation in rural areas. Particular attention, for theological and other reasons, needs to be paid to the small size of rural communities, which necessitates a different approach from urban ministry. The theologies of place and the cure of souls also impinge on the work of rural priests. The paper finishes with the consideration of some issues of pastoral theology in the countryside, and its application to the church's care of priests involved in reorganisations.*

1. Discussions in the Hampshire Rural Group (Rural Theology Association) over the two years of its meetings have helped to identify some reasons for appreciating rural areas differently from urban or suburban. These are sociological, geographical and theological. This paper focusses mainly on the latter, in relation to the pressing problem of pastoral reorganisation in Winchester Diocese. This paper incorporates comments made at the meeting on 28 February 2007 at Binsted.
2. The definition of *rurality* used here is a modification of the national one, that settlements with populations below 10,000 are rural. A *rural town* is defined as a settlement of a population of between 4,000 - 10,000: a *village* less than 4,000. In rural terms, a *settlement* is an aggregation of dwellings within an area, discrete from its neighbouring settlements, bounded by countryside. A *parish* is both the area definitively marked on the Church Commissioners' map as such, and an idea in the mind of parishioners, though often less regarded by those living elsewhere. We understand the parish to be the basic unit of ministry and mission within the structures of the Church of England, following the vision which led to the original founding of the parish church for worship and service.
3. When changes are mooted, theological considerations are not often raised in discussions. Deanery planning and consultation to reduce the number of stipendiary priests is sometimes undermined by the random occurrence of vacancies, through retirement or a move. While reorganisation is always pursued prayerfully and often with sensitivity, it is often alleged that pragmatism is the main determining value, and financial considerations, especially the ability to pay the Parish Share, figure highly in the suspected 'hidden motives' of 'the Diocese'.
4. Against this background, the Group wished to address questions of theology in order to inform and guide the process of reorganisation, which it recognises must be faced in the current circumstances. Theology as a discipline requires the most careful attention to the work of God in the incarnation: the incarnation demands that the human context is understood with the maximum sensitivity and precision.
5. From the theological perspective, we have considered the Holy Trinity, rural 'community' and relatedness; the theology of place with regard to the pattern and history of settlement and churches. The ecclesial concept of 'cure of souls' has much to contribute in understanding the priestly role, and as it expands to ministry into different parochial configurations and expressions of mission. Pastoral theology also has a contribution to offer to the practice of reorganisation.
6. The Group wishes to offer a vision both of the possibilities and limitations inherent in the rural parish and benefice, and question how ever-larger groupings of parishes can serve that missionary vision. We believe that a dynamic and creative ministry can be offered even from the conservative resource of a church building and ancient parish.
7. **The Trinity and Persons in Relation:** Trinitarian *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the beginning and the end of human existence and source of all human social well-being.
  - a. The church is the community of those who are in Christ, as he is in them, so bound to other members by the rule of love that they are prepared to give themselves for one another, just as he gave himself for them for them (John 13). That is the theological community of the church, which is also a communion. The church is also the agent of the Kingdom of God in the world,

living the life of the Kingdom now in anticipation of its full arrival. Beyond that, in marriage, friendship, neighbourhood, in the wider 'community', individual church members are 'persons in relation'. They are who they are, partly through their indwelling relation with God, partly through their friendships, family relationships etc. The comparatively small scale of villages throws the quality of personal relations within them into greater relief and give them a higher importance than in a town. That these are small communities is the significant factor.

- b. A village's relationship with God is made communally visible in its church, both as (ancient) building and (living) people. This is represented through the priestly ministry of the whole church, ordained and lay, in its incarnational relating to the parish, and in its adoration and worship. The parish is therefore in practice a spiritual 'unit': of the people of a place – the church of a place – God; the church being a sacramental sign of the gospel of Jesus.
- c. Given that villages tend to be discrete settlements within their parishes, village churches also tend to be discrete and disconnected from one another, though there are sometimes interlocking histories. The fact that they are neighbouring, in the same deanery or diocese, means little in terms of attachment. The modern benefice boundary is a doodle on the surface of village history. The contrast with their theological reality in Christ could hardly be greater. However, since relatedness characterises rural and rural church life, the question must be raised is to what extent this relatedness can stretch beyond the single parish.
- d. For reasons both theological and practical, it is the total number of churches in a benefice which is the central problem, not the total population, bearing in mind that each parish church is legally and bureaucratically a separate small charity. The highest number of parishes which can be formed into a functioning benefice should also be limited by the number of open churchyards, parochial charities, (church) schools and component settlements and their relatedness (or rivalry), the number of occasional services. The accumulation of responsibilities from these weigh upon the benefice priest, and the failure to take adequate care of them can be a cause of local scandal.
- e. For there are limits to coherence and the ability to develop relatedness across large rural areas and the meaningful unity possible beyond a certain point, precisely because of how the tension between theological reality and lack of relationship is borne as a cost in the life of the priest. While fellowship and church attendance in urban areas might be predicated on a sense of 'playing for the team', in villages the main attendance is often by those new to village life. The native villager paradoxically does not need to attend to support the parish church. The fact of their belonging is made visible when necessary, sometimes to raise critical objections more than to praise. The limits of relatedness are greater than those to the number and quality of relationship that can be sustained by anyone. The rural church tends to build community through *Gemeinschaft*, strong personal ties and relationships, in contrast to the *Gesellschaft* of its urban sister, in its more loosely knit community. So the population in rural benefices needs to be kept down compared with other parishes.
- f. Financial arrangements sometimes reveal the real relationships beneath the surface. The perception is that the rural ministry is a drain on diocesan resources. In terms of Winchester Diocesan Parish Share, urban parishes pay just over half, 52.6%; rural villages 33.19% and rural towns 14.21% [the author's calculations]. The proportion of rural churches in the Diocese of Winchester is just over half of the 400 churches. The rural population is around 9.9% of the whole of Hampshire [Hampshire County Council statistics; admittedly not the same as the Diocese, but roughly similar]. The Diocesan financial relationship between urban and rural is therefore one in which the rural churches subsidise the ministry to the 90.1% of the population which lives in urban and rural town areas. This suggests that if pastoral reorganisation is badly handled in rural areas there might be adverse financial consequences for the Diocesan Parish Share collection, and so for urban mission. Raymond Williams argues that city and countryside are in fact interdependent, and this underlies the sharp confrontations recently seen between the two ways of life over such issues as hunting.

- g. The diocese and bishop need to hold the ring to ensure a fairness in provision of stipendiary priests in rural areas when numbers overall are dropping. On the face of it, it is already inequitable that there are benefices of 11 parishes at the same time when there are others of three. This is transitional, of course, but there must have been some discussion about the expected average number of parishes to a rural benefice in the projected future circumstances. This information should be published so that all know and can comment, if necessary challenging the reasoning, and adjust towards it. However, it is necessary to recognise that a bald number in itself is just a guide, and other factors need to contribute to the 'formula' (5d above) to make it fair. Subtlety is required in understanding each unique rural situation, and it is unfair to place a priest in a situation which is so demanding as to be personally destructive.
8. **Theology of Place:** A 'place' is 'storied space', according to Brueggemann. A village is such a 'storied space'. The story is an accumulation of personal histories in relation to a specific geographical area, told in terms of attachment to the place. One of the significant and enduring stories is that of the parish priest within the place. The role will have been held by a succession of people over centuries. This is part of the village story and tends to explain why rural areas are more 'traditional' than other places, given also a strong kinship network still existing in many villages. It involved beneficial land holding, pastoral care, relationship to church, and, very significantly also, relationship to churchyard. The benefits accrue by ordination and appointment to the living by the bishop. The best term for this is 'parson', the identified 'person' bearing the spiritual care of the parish, living in it as 'persona ecclesiae'. Historically, there are few persons who have significant stories in more than one village at the same time, until modern times and the advent of such area representatives as borough and county councillors. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be a leader in other than the parish of residence: for, in village terms, non-residence undermines credibility. It is possible to pray 'residentially' in a number of church buildings, a prayer of dwelling, however the day to day village personal contact is lacking and cannot be fully made up even by assiduous visiting. The sustaining of a Christian community in a village without a resident priest is a different challenge to one in which he resides. The rural priest has to take the villagers' stories and sense of place very seriously, while living the Christian reality that every place is a place of exile from God who is our true and ultimate home.
9. **The Cure of Souls:** The responsibility of the priest to the people is the 'cure of souls'. The bishop commits the cure of souls to the parish priest at the institution of ministry in the place as a member of the natural, spatial community of those who make it their home. This originally Roman Catholic concept (*cura animarum*) might better be understood as a spiritual relatedness rather than a relationship – a territorial principle of pastoral care. Yet the cure of souls is greater than pastoral care: pastoral care is an active, face-to-face relationship of necessity to a comparatively few, the cure of souls a spiritual responsibility both for those faced and those not yet known. Eugene Peterson contrasts the *cure of souls* with 'running a church', which he argues is the secularized corruption of the role of pastor, and, we might say, a multiple snare in a multi-parish benefice. The responsibility for the cure of souls is worked out in seeking the salvation of the people through instruction and sanctification through the sacraments, the centre being the altar of Christ in the particular place and church (Karl Rahner). The cure of souls might also be interpreted in terms of evangelical theology of ministry and mission. The ultimate responsibility is the Bishop's, who shares it by appointing 'curates' (in the Prayer Book sense). The fact that the Bishop has the cure of souls for his diocese suggests that it is not theoretically limited by high number. However, experience suggests that the threshold at which it needs to be turned into personal contact is much lower in villages, as smaller communities, than in more built up areas. From this fact, as well as the actual geographical spread of rural settlements, the rural priest should have a lower population than her urban counterpart. The question is whether it is correct theology for one ordained as a parish priest to be asked to maintain an episcopal level 'cure of souls' in a large multi-parish rural benefice, beyond his ordained vocation. This concept of *cure of souls* as a key to understanding the pastoral and spiritual nature of rural parochial ministry indicates that the residual tradition of such remains catholic rather than fully reformed.
10. Taking the *cure of souls* as the basic parochial priestly pastoral calling, the question arises as to how

the Non Stipendiary Priest exercises it. This question is a matter of great concern to assistant priests working in rural areas. Lack of clarity on this makes answering the larger, and still unresolved question, as to the priestly role of the NSM in a benefice more difficult. There is a feeling that, although there is considerable experience which has now accrued, the issues are both for the wider church and within the confines of the benefice. It is both a matter of agreement between incumbent and NSM within the benefice, and an episcopal decision relating to his cure of souls. In the traditional understanding (and Institution Service) the bishop both retains and delegates the cure of souls in his diocese to his curates, the parish priests. One view might be that the parish priest, in a 'bishop-in-little' capacity, both retains and delegates the parochial or beneficial *cure of souls* of particular areas to the assistant priest. That would be the catholic, hierarchical understanding. However, work needs to be done in rethinking the *cure of souls* in a collegial, team approach, and how it relates to lay ministry – if that is indeed compatible with the concept. However, a more clearly defined vision of the cure of souls could lead to greater confidence in priestly ministry and mission, strengthening both lay and ordained.

11. **Pastoral Theology:** The spirituality natural to the village responds first to God as creator, the landscape being so obviously marked by the changing seasons, growth and decay, life and death, light and darkness. The festivals of creation – Harvest, Rogation, animal blessing – still have some ability to speak to those unaffiliated to church. However, there is a step from this to a living faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
  - a. The development towards an incarnational faith is aided through the vulnerable 'living among' of the priest as servant. The pastoral expectation in rural areas is for personal encounter with the priest, rather than bureaucratic exchange. Thus it would not be appropriate to have occasional service bookings made by a church administrator, though it might in other ways be more efficient. The way this encounter is handled is itself a witness to Christ, in the representative role the vicar holds. So much of rural ministry has a sacramental character. The church itself is a sign of God's continuing presence in the village. The behaviour of Christians, including the priest, is a sign of the incarnational presence of Christ. Only the rich have somewhere to hide in rural areas. Everyone else is known, and for the rural priest there is no hiding place. This is the incarnational presence of living among those to whom one ministers in the name of Jesus Christ. There is a limit to the number of villages in which one can become known in this way, and the priest will need to develop the skill of coming in mission, as one sent out into other villages.
  - b. We might also consider questions of dependency. Villages with a resident priest tend to function differently from those which do not. There can be a sort of pride, "We have a pub, a church, a shop, our own vicar ..." By contrast, a village which has lost its resident incumbent can feel that it has in some way been downgraded – conveniently forgetting any 'difficulties' over the years with their incumbents. This dependency in loss or presence can demotivate some lay people from accepting the roles and responsibilities they might otherwise undertake. With the influx of a wealthy and successful middle class moving out from urban areas during the last 30 years, this dependent role may be a deeper source of tension: on the one hand these are the very capable leaders of commerce and industry, yet they may seek a quiet and undemanding life in the village and church. In the dynamics of some villages, the priest is needed to hold strong members far enough apart for them to work together. Pastoral reorganisation needs to take sensitive account of the location of clergy, while recognising that there is not great room for manoeuvre because of the inherited housing stock.
  - c. Reorganisation raises the possibility of a personal strengthening or regaining of vocational vision for rural parochial clergy. But in practice this can be undermined by relentless bureaucratic demands, from 'the Diocese' and church officers to run the churches efficiently. This tends to be clouded further by the equivocal demands of 'the Diocese' on the benefice priest: the Bishop that she should follow her vocation to priesthood; the organisation (Archdeacon, Church House, Deanery) that she should act as a parochial chief executive, garnering Parish Share, be a message runner to and from the centre. One danger is that of a growing resentment of such demands in the parish, so poisoning the relationship between 'centre' and 'periphery'.

- d. The creation of ever larger pastoral areas will also have environmental consequences. There will be personal financial consequences for the priest. The only practical way of getting round a benefice is by car, and thus travel depends upon carbon fuels. Bearing in mind that there is also likely to be a significant distance between the villages and their hospitals, there will be some environmental impact which is not often considered. It is also questionable whether anyone without some external means of income can now maintain a ministry in rural areas, especially if bringing up children, because of the generally increased cost of living and travel in the countryside.
12. **Pastoral Practice:** In practical terms, when pastoral reorganisation is mooted in rural areas, the Bishop might consider appointing a (rural) colleague as mentor and sounding board to clergy involved, for the duration of the process (at least three years). The Ministry Development Department should be proactive in monitoring training needs, which are not only about training for leadership. There are also signs that for priests facing such challenges, there is value in theological seminars to help see where God is present in the process. Thus the reorganisation might become a place of spiritual and vocational growth, with its losses and gains, within a stronger ecclesial collegiality than obtains at present.
13. Some further work might be done on the role of new information technologies in the reorganisation process, for instance the setting up of a website specifically to explain the processes and parameters and keep everyone informed about discussions and decisions, and to encourage the feeding back of comments and suggestions. The value of 'blogging' in the process is yet to be tested. We also need to develop different types of support structures for the clergy involved. The clergy chapter may not be a suitable place as others can feel and naturally resist the threat of gradually being 'picked off'. However, more might be made of reflecting with colleagues on their previous experience of reorganisations, good and bad, rather than leaving such experience for each individual priest involved to work through and the fruit of that reflection unharvested by the wider church.
14. Perhaps above all there is an urgent need to keep exploring the significance of different types of spiritual support during the process of reorganisation. The expectation of clergy involved in reorganisation taking a full monthly quiet day without distractions, and two full weeks' retreat, both fully funded from Diocesan rather than parish funds, should be made clear to all by the Bishop and Training Department for the three years of the process. Inadequate attention is usually paid to this aspect of the burden of change.
15. Rural ministry has always demanded patience. Now it demands the ability to keep in balance a variety of pressures exerted between the small communities, and within them, as well as the tension of the calling to live the values of the Kingdom of God in this fractured society.

*Martin Coppen*  
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### **Books mentioned**

Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Fortress Press, 1977 and later editions), pp 5 & 185

Eugene H Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Eerdmans, 1989), especially chapter 6, *Curing Souls*

Karl Rahner, from *A Rahner Reader*, ed Gerald A McCool (DLT, 1975) pp296ff, from *Theological Investigations II*, 290-1, 306-7

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (OUP, 1975)