

The Church in Rural Communities

The Most Rev David Chillingworth, Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld & Dunblane and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church

“I'm writing on the island of Iona. On the ferry from Oban to Mull was the mobile bank. On the way across Mull, I passed the mobile Dental Clinic. To provide services and sustain community in rural areas is important – but it is challenging and expensive. When I reached Iona, I became part of an area of our church where worship and caring ministry are sustained by a small number of clergy and by the commitment of lay members. It isn't easy for us either.

“This weekend sees the Royal Highland Show – that great festival of rural community life. The Scottish Episcopal Church's General Synod recently received a Report from its Rural Commission. And of course the recent Assembly of the Church of Scotland continued to debate the issue of territoriality – the question of whether the church is going to be able to sustain parish life in every part of Scotland.

“Traditionally of course, the countryside suits church life. Church communities work well in settled communities. We are probably more influenced than we might care to admit by Jane Austen and John Betjeman pictures of the English village with duck pond, village green and parish church. But if you look closer, you'll find that today's idyllic parish church south of the border is grouped with five others and that the vicar lives miles away.

“The reality is that churches tend to drift towards the suburbs. Concentration of population makes it easier to sustain church life – after all churches are entirely financed by voluntary giving. That's why there has been a focus on ministry in Urban Priority Areas. That's why there is now a focus on sustaining the life of the church in rural areas – lest the church like the school, the Post Office, the doctor, the rural bus services should join the retreat from the rural community.

“But things are not as difficult as they seem. The Scottish Episcopal Church's Rural Commission reported that during the past decade it is the population in rural areas which has been increasing most rapidly – over 10% in accessible rural areas and over 5% in remote rural areas. Of course there are problems. Age profile is high, the public sector is the largest employer and transport is a big issue. Issues which arise from climate change will bear most heavily on rural communities.

“So rather than dealing with rural de-population, we are beginning to see possibilities of growth in church life in rural areas. Those who come to live in the countryside will do so by choice – often because of 'quality of life' choices. They will be a diverse group – more likely to be involved in volunteering and community life than others.

“No one should imagine that we can recreate a rural idyll of church life in the countryside. As in the city, so in the country our clergy and people need to engage fully in community issues. That means taking a full part in work on tourism, farming, efforts to sustain local schools, medical services and transport links. If we want to see viable rural church communities, we must work for viable rural communities.

“The Scottish churches’ tent at the Royal Highland Show has been well visited in past years and gives us an opportunity to learn how people are dealing with living in rural communities. It may be a showcase for all that is best about rural life, but the Royal Highland Show also allows us all to look at ways of working together to deal with the issues and challenges of sustaining rural communities in the future. I believe that churches and other faith communities must together be part of that story. “

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