

Scottish Episcopal Church

Rural Commission

Background

The SEC has around 250 congregations located out with our major cities including churches on most of Scotland's larger islands. Rural issues have long been important to our Christian witness. We have been concerned that

- Fair Trade policies should apply to Scotland's food producers as well as to those in the developing world
- Our society should value the contribution of the 20% of our national population who live in rural communities
- Care of God's creation should be at the heart of our environmental policy and how we live and relate to others.

We have been involved with initiatives such as

- Care Farming Scotland
- The Government Food Forum
- The use of churches as community centres in the wake of Rural Post Office closures

At the 2008 Synod the SEC established a Rural Commission to review the current state of the Rural church and to plan for the future. The agreed aims of the commission are:

- to identify major issues, such as the projected changes to the Common Agricultural Policy in 2013 which could halve farming incomes, likely to have a major impact on Scotland's rural communities
- to assess what might be the role of the church in mitigating the downsides of future changes
- to assess just how the church should be changing in the light of both general trends in society such as the increasing use of broadband and specific issues such as Climate Change targets so that it can better serve the rural communities of the future. The scope for us to change ranges from our role in the development of social businesses through to the future form of liturgies.

How We Are Working

The commission comprises a small core steering group, convened by Bishop Mark Strange, who will draw in a wider range of people to comment on and to develop plans on specific issues. The use of our Provincial web site will be the primary means of consultation. A major element of both the way of working and of plans for the future is partnership, with other Christian denominations, other faiths and secular organizations. The key first step in our process is listening to the views of Christians and others so that we can identify potential issues, anticipate problems but most especially identify the things which have worked in rural communities so we can assess whether they might help

else where. We are clear that the rural church is strong and has good news to share. We would like to hear its stories. We are interested in hearing how worshipping communities have been maintained, the Eucharist celebrated and ways in which worship has been modified so as to meet the needs of smaller congregations; especially out with church based services. We would like information on ways in which church buildings have been used to the benefit of communities; such as food hubs or electronic café's. We want to hear how modern electronic means of communication have helped fellowship and evangelism.

Moving Ahead

The rural commission was set up because as a church we are clear about the importance of our rural sector to the future of Scotland. We recognize that that importance must be based on tradition in transition and thus on a vision which is faithful to its heritage and yet appropriate to a world which will be altered by factors such as universal access to broadband but also, as our Christian response to the impact of climate change, to a reduced mobility so as to reduce the release of green house gases which is an inevitable consequence of travel.

What Else is Planned

The commission will be running a series of three conferences as a means of collecting views and developing the thinking of our church. Detailed information on these will be added so that you can participate. Provisional plans are

1) Rural life in 2020. Perth, October 2009

A meeting aimed at discussion of the changes which seem most likely to occur in the rural sector in the period up to 2020. The principal subjects to be addressed are likely to be

- The impact of climate change and of climate change legislation
- Changes in agriculture and food production
- Changing communication and transport infra-structure
- The health care needs of rural communities
- The provision of education in a rural setting
- The future make up of rural communities and the facilities available to them

2) The rural church in 2020. Inverness, November, 2009

A meeting aimed identifying the changes needed in our churches to fit them for the world of 2020. The principal subjects likely to be addressed are

- How we will be church in 2020
- Liturgies which emphasise the issues of rural communities and which are appropriate to future patterns of rural ministry and for people of a range of denominations.
- Training for rural ministry
- Fresh expressions in a rural context
- The rural church as a spiritual centre
- A forum to bring together good practice in our current rural churches

3) The church in the rural community in 2020. Inverurie, February 2010

A meeting to discuss the future place of the church in the community. The principal subjects likely to be addressed are

- Options for partnership working with other denominations
- Options for working with civic society and commercial organisations such as the Post Office
- The development of social enterprise businesses
- The use of churches as community facilities such as meeting rooms, heritage centres, internet café's, food distribution points
- The church as a help centre for those in need.

What Can You Do?

Bishop Mark and the commission would like to hear from you. We want to hear

- Your thoughts on the issues upon which we need to focus and the areas where you feel that change will be essential to the maintenance of a viable rural church.
- Your good news stories. The things which you have done and which have been valued by church members and communities and which you would like to share.

Comment on the views and ideas coming from the meetings and what is posted on the web

What Happens Next?

The commission reported on its work to date at the 2009 meeting of the General Synod. The work of the commission will be an element in the SEC presence in the Scottish Churches Rural Group Pavilion at the 2009 Royal Highland show.

In the coming months we will be evaluating response to the above request. The intention is to produce a final report for the 2010 general synod.