

GOD BLESS AFRICA

Worship for a Time like this

17 – 19 March 2015

Helderberg Gemeente, Somerset West

Workshop:

WORKING WITH WHAT YOU HAVE: Finding the Riches in Rural & Under-resourced Churches¹

Introduction

We speak of God as being '**omnipresent**'. God's people, too, are called to live and love in every kind of community – not least the rural areas or under-resourced areas of our communities. God's presence, often mediated through human agency, working, praying, supporting, encouraging, teaching, challenging, is vital to the well-being of our increasingly fragmented communities and our threatened rural areas. The Church is called to live out Christ's reconciling mission in standing up for justice and creating social cohesion.

Rural communities are made up of farm labourers, people working in quarries, miners, fishermen and women, and their families, but may also include people from the landowning class. Often times the working class are seasonal workers (especially the farm labourers and fishermen and women!)

The realities of rural life are hard work, cold, hunger, discomfort and uncertainty!

Who/what is rural and/or under-resourced?

There is no nationally accepted definition of what constitutes rural though there is general agreement that the term describes an area with settlements of less than 10,000 inhabitants². Clearly market towns, as centres of rural life, may have populations in excess of 10,000 yet cannot be separated from their rural neighbourhood.

¹ Adapted from the paper "Presence" published by the Methodist Church, London, UK.

² Statistics South Africa classify settlements according to the characteristics of a residential population in terms of urban and rural, degree of planned and unplanned (in the case of urban) and jurisdiction (in the case of rural). The four broad settlement types found in South Africa are:

- a) formal urban areas
- b) informal urban areas
- c) commercial farms
- d) tribal areas and rural informal settlements

Anyone who has worked in rural communities will recognise the basic difference between 'locals' and 'incomers'. Typically, 'locals' belong to and identify with the community but may feel no strong need to get involved actively in community affairs. 'Incomers' often seek acceptance by the community through active participation and getting things done. The growth in the number of 'incomers' is a major factor in the changed identity of many rural villages. Rural communities are ageing as the young move out, unable to afford homes or find work.

Rural communities have long memories and it may take generations to heal rifts and divisions caused by seemingly slight disagreements or 'faux pas'.

Family links are still important and friends rally round.

Rural residents are more likely to give time and effort to voluntary organisations than those living in urban areas, but there are fewer links to institutions. There are also lower levels of partnership development in rural areas.

There is less diversity among rural groups and sometimes a reluctance to recognise, face and deal with the difficult issues – racism, poverty, domestic violence, drugs or social exclusion.

Some of the comments above may also be applicable to the township³ church, some of which may have come into being as a result of the group areas act or created for black migrant labour. The effects of gangsterism, drugs and violence in communities certainly have a bearing on the effectiveness of the mission and ministry of the church. Added to that are issues such as unemployment and other socio-politico-economic conditions.

SUSTAINING THE RURAL CHURCH

Faith in the Countryside (1990) stressed that a primary Christian principle is respect for the whole created order and a concern for our fellow human beings throughout the world. Creation is given to us on trust. As trustees or custodians, we are all responsible for its stewardship. Farming parables and metaphors recur throughout Christian teachings, but what do we feel about farming? Most people are now separated by four or five generations from actually living in the countryside and, for many, the perception of a link between the countryside and their food has been lost.

The countryside is changing rapidly. In the midst of all this stands the church – present, active, struggling. The church buildings are often among the oldest in the community. Their story is woven into the fabric of the settlement and they remain central to its life. The congregations are made up of local people and sometimes recent incomers who see and experience the impact of change on their own lives and on the lives of their neighbours.

³ Historically, 'township' in South Africa referred to an urban residential area created for black migrant labour, usually beyond the town or city limits. Reference is sometimes made to 'black township', 'coloured township' and 'Indian township', meaning that these settlements were created for these population groups. By contrast, the white population resided in suburbs. Informal synonyms for township are 'location', 'lokasie', 'ilogishi'. Generally, every town/city has one or several townships associated with it (Statistics South Africa, 2004).

How can the church discover new ways to support those experiencing fundamental change?
How can the rural church, whilst facing enormous challenges itself, continue to serve the whole community including the disadvantaged and the excluded?

The churches have a mission to worship God and to serve their neighbour. Part of this role is to help people to make sense of the issues facing them, by hearing, listening, understanding and responding. In partnership with other agencies, churches are becoming increasingly important links in the delivery of some services traditionally provided by local and central government. In many areas involvement in community development is using a more significant part of the Church's time and resources. In ways that are locally appropriate, our rural churches are working to assist local people to achieve their full potential. Sometimes called 'capacity building', this means helping people to develop skills, confidence and knowledge. Churches can also enable the voice of rural communities to be heard by speaking out on policies and economic decisions which affect the countryside.

The use of the word 'church' is important when we think about alternative patterns of presence. A church is more than a fellowship group. People belong to fellowship groups for prayer, mutual encouragement, learning and support whereas "the Church exists to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. Of course we all need mutual encouragement, we all need to learn more about our faith and we all need support in living out our discipleship – but the primary calling of the church is to be there for others and to build community.

There is no more powerful argument for promoting "an effective Christian presence in villages" than the life and ministry of Jesus as described in the gospels. When God chose to reveal himself to his world he did so in Jesus of Nazareth. St John tells us that "he made his home among us and we saw his glory" (John 1:14). The presence of God is to be realised where we are; in the struggles and joys of our everyday lives. The presence of God and the reality of God's love are to be seen and borne witness to in the ordinary everyday stories and experiences of our lives as they are lived out among our neighbours.

Many ministers perceive rural or township ministry as unattractive. As a consequence of this it is difficult to station ministers in rural appointments especially. Without appropriate training and support ministers can find rural appointments demanding yet unfulfilling. The result of this experience is often stress, frustration and disappointment. Members of rural churches frequently feel misunderstood, undervalued and under-resourced.

The overwhelming expectation of many within our churches is that the primary purpose of worship and fellowship is to bring a sense of personal fulfilment, support and wellbeing to the individual. There is little understanding of the importance of being a presence:

- The belief that worship, prayer and the celebration of the sacraments offered faithfully and lovingly in the heart of a community enriches everyone is under-developed and as a consequence under-valued
- The importance of 'the sacred space' is neglected and yet many people crave silence and stillness in the midst of the frenetic demands of their daily lives

- The growing demand for simple rituals to express the sorrows and joys of human experience such as: the lighting of candles, the writing of prayer requests, and the laying of flowers, goes unrecognised and yet it is an authentic expression of popular spirituality
- The confidence that our faith story has an authenticity and power to communicate in every culture and every new generation is weak and therefore we do not face the challenge of finding new and imaginative ways of telling it and celebrating it
- We know and affirm that Christian discipleship lived out in the routines and seasons of everyday life is the most powerful and effective means of witness and yet we often deny ourselves effective opportunities for mutual support.

An effective Christian presence is needed in the many and varied communities that human beings inhabit. These include not only urban, suburban and rural neighbourhood communities but also, for example, the communities of the workplace, leisure centre and mutual interest.

We hope that the following group studies will further explore some aspects of what it means to promote an effective Christian presence in the communities of rural and under-resourced churches.

Study 1: An effective Christian presence?

Luke 4: 14- 30

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’

²³He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’ ²⁴And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The greater part of Jesus' life was spent in the small towns and villages around Galilee. Many knew him as the carpenter's son; they knew his mother and his brothers and sisters. It was here that Jesus began his ministry and it was in these communities that he told his stories. Jesus often illustrated his teaching and found inspiration for his parables from his experience of village life. It would have been much easier for Jesus to begin his ministry where he wasn't known but he chose Galilee where he had been brought up and where nothing about his life could be hidden. It is much easier to be anonymous Christians, getting into our cars on Sunday mornings and worshipping in the church in the suburb or town ten kilometres away. It is much more difficult being identified as gospel people in our own rural area or township. If we are to follow the pattern of Jesus we must live out our discipleship

where we are known and where we can be held accountable to each other and our neighbours for our discipleship.

An effective Christian presence will be one in which a priestly, prophetic and evangelising ministry is exercised.

PRIESTLY

- offering to God: adoration, praise, gratitude, penitence and intercession on behalf of and for the whole community
- celebrating the story of God's self-giving and redeeming love in word and sacrament
- making known through its presence and its life the creating, redeeming and sustaining God revealed in Jesus Christ and known through the Holy Spirit
- demonstrating the reality of God's purpose to reconcile all things to himself in relationships of acceptance and forgiveness
- reaching out to the community in acts of grace, love and kindness

PROPHETIC

- accepting and challenging others to obey the call to Christ-like living
- setting before the church and the world the values of the Kingdom of God
- interpreting those values into the everyday life of the local community
- recognising and challenging injustice
- standing alongside, empowering and enabling the oppressed and vulnerable
- challenging people to recognise their responsibility to the world community

EVANGELISING

- interpreting the story of God's love for every community and every generation
- witnessing to what God can do in the life of individuals and communities
- setting the claims of Jesus before people and challenging them to a response
- enabling a gracious encounter with the God whose redeeming love is for everyone
- creating and maintaining welcoming communities where people can be nurtured in discipleship

Case Study:

Dear George,

We are looking forward to your visit to Heathlands next Sunday when you will be leading our morning worship.

There will only be a few of us – probably about eight. There may be three children aged between nine and fourteen. Jane will be playing the piano (we've no organist now) and so if you could let her have your hymns she'd be grateful.

Thank you for travelling so far, there are so few of us we sometimes wonder if it's worth continuing. When you last came we had a Sunday School but it closed at Easter. It wasn't that the children wouldn't come – it was just that most of us are getting on and don't feel we can cope. Jane and Judith ran it for a while but they are both teachers and feel that after a week's teaching they just can't cope with children

on a Sunday morning! I wish some of the new folk in the village would show some interest but they all seem to be so busy.

You ought to know that Dorothy's husband (James) is very ill. Dorothy will probably be there on Sunday – if she can leave him. Perhaps you could mention James in your prayers. Ben and I are keeping well although with farming as it is we've both had a lot of anxiety. You will have heard that Philip was married just before Christmas. He and Alison wanted to buy a house in Heathlands but the houses here are too expensive for them. Dorothy's daughter had the same problem. It's a pity!

I look forward to seeing you on Sunday. We'll both be there if Ben gets the milking done in time.

Yours sincerely,

Betty

For discussion

1. "...we sometimes wonder if it is worth continuing"

Is this how you feel?

How far does your church understand itself as a priestly, prophetic and evangelising community?

2. "You ought to know that Dorothy's husband's very ill"
"We've both had a lot of anxiety"

In what ways can a small village church respond to the pastoral needs of its community?

3. "We had a Sunday School, but it closed at Easter...."

In many villages the Sunday School provided a way of "telling the story". In what new and imaginative ways can we tell the story today? How can we invite others to join us on the journey of Christian discipleship? In what ways can we engage with young families?

Study 2: Remembering our story.

Hebrews 11:1 – 12:2

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and 'he was not found, because God had taken him.' For it was attested before he was taken away that 'he had pleased God.' ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ⁷By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, ¹⁸of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' ¹⁹He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. ²¹By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff.' ²²By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Here we meet God's people; a pilgrim people who are always on the move. 'Change' and not 'the status quo' is the norm; but through all this change runs the faith which is described in Hebrews 11:1. From the very beginning of the human story and despite their own disobedience, fear and uncertainty, God's people have trusted God. In their faith they have found an irrepressible and at times inexplicable hope that has enabled them to discover new ways and patterns of faithfulness and obedience. All this comes to a climax in Jesus. Jesus is the pioneer of a faith and the ground of a hope that leads through death to resurrection, from dying to new life.

What does this mean for us today? The people of the Bible knew times of tiredness, frustration and disappointment but in such times there was always someone to remind

them of their story. When their forebears were slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses, set them free, and led them through the wilderness to a new land (eg Deuteronomy 6:4-12). When they forgot what it was to be a covenant people God sent the prophets to challenge them and lead them back to him (eg Hosea 6:1-6). When they were carried into exile and grieved deeply for all that they had lost they found God in the strange land; calling them by name, holding them in the hollow of God's hand and leading them into a radical and new understanding of God's nature and purpose (eg Isaiah 42:1-13).

When the disciples of Jesus found themselves battling against a head wind and a rough sea, Jesus came to them in the midst of the storm and when they cried out to him he helped them (Mark 6:45-52). When all their hopes were shattered at Calvary they found Jesus walking by their side and recognised him at the breaking of bread (Luke 24:13-32).

Times of change are also times for remembering the great stories of faith and discovering new ways of being God's people.

For discussion

1. What stories of courage and/or encouragement are prominent in the minds of the people in your congregation?

How do these stories make you feel?

How could such stories be a motivating factor as your church faces the challenges of societal ills that may hinder mission and ministry?

2. Do you remember (or know) how your church started out in the community / village?

What challenges were faced then? What obstacles were overcome?

What can be learnt from such experiences? And how can you tap into such stories as you face your current scenario (being under-resourced)?

Study 3: A worshipping presence; an ecumenical presence; a community presence.

Acts 2:43–47

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Here, in a summary paragraph, is a glimpse of the early Christian Church.

There was a sense of awe among these early believers. Authentic worship lifts us out of the ordinary and familiar into an awareness of the mystery of God; of his awesome being and of his presence and grace both in the world and in human experience. In this awareness we offer ourselves to him in humility, reverence and gratitude.

These New Testament Christians lived lives of integrity. Life choices were determined by their faith and, in these early days, by the belief that the return of the Lord was imminent.

Worship was public and private, corporate and individual. It was offered both in the temple and in the home with 'unaffected joy'. Such worship, and its accompanying life style, was seen by and proved attractive to family, neighbours and friends.

For discussion

1. What do you value about worship?

In what sense do you experience a sense of awe and reverence in your weekly worship?

2. What are the special challenges and opportunities for a rural / under-resourced church in developing its worship?

3. As local Christians what priorities do you share with Christians of other denominations? How might your chapel join in partnership with other groups in the community to make a real difference where you live?
4. What are the common opportunities for mission in your village or town?
5. Statistics show that over half of those serving on Church Councils are also engaged in some piece of regular service in the community, with young, elderly or disadvantaged. What partnerships could be formed for the church to become more visible in the community? How can the resources of the various denominations be of collective benefit to individual churches and the community? What about collective training in churches in the same community, eg. Equipping Lay Leaders, Baptism and/or Marriage Preparation Classes?

Study 4: Effective ministry in rural/under-resourced church.

There are many patterns of ministry in the New Testament. Diversity, development and new responses to changing situations and a variety of contexts are the norm but running through them all is the insistence that ministry belongs to the whole people of God. Each individual brings God-given gifts to be used collaboratively for the benefit of all and in ministry to the world (eg Romans 12:3–5, Ephesians 4:7, 1 Peter 4:10). Whilst the church needs leadership it is to be exercised collaboratively so that the whole body is enabled. (eg 1 Peter 5:1–2).

REMEMBER

The challenge is to encourage lay and ordained to work together in developing appropriate and sustainable patterns of ministry. Ministry is for everyone, not just the clergy. We need to empower our local congregations to show the love of Christ in and for their local community.

Here are some suggestions for you to discuss:

What about Local Ministry Enabling Teams?

Greenwood (2000) writes: “Ministry is for everyone, not just the clergy. The leadership of every church, parish and congregation in the land is the responsibility of the whole of that community. Churches need leadership, but that leadership will empower the whole congregation, fusing them into a dynamic, outward looking community, bearing witness to the powerful message of the Gospel”

A Local Ministry Enabling Team is composed of a small group of people nominated by Church Council and appointed by the circuit meeting. The team always includes the ordained minister who has pastoral responsibility for the church and maybe a locally commissioned ‘pastor’.

In small rural churches the whole membership might be ‘the team’! A regular meeting (fortnightly or monthly) is the focus of devotion, study, sharing and planning. The team works at fulfilling the four areas of Our Calling in the context of its village community and in the setting of fellowship, prayer and bible study. Formal church council meetings will only be necessary where matters of trusteeship are to be decided.

Working within local ministry enabling teams will be a new concept for many ministers. For some it will mean learning new skills and adopting new ways of working but this approach has the potential to bring a new dynamic and offer new opportunities for creative ministry. This will be particularly true where the minister has pastoral responsibility for several churches. For these patterns to emerge the whole church needs to take this process seriously and local churches need to know that they are supported by the church denomination hierarchy.

Could Cell Church be an answer?

Where the traditional patterns of Church life become hard to sustain, Cell Church, or some similar weeknight structure has much to offer. Where buildings become too difficult to maintain and numbers are small, a positive way forward can be to meet in local homes on weeknights or Sunday evenings as a cell of a larger church. Cell church is often a model adopted very effectively by large urban or suburban churches. In rural areas this might be somewhat problematic given the long distances one has to travel. Barring this, the cell church principle could be adapted so that a number of small dispersed cells work together as part of a greater whole.

The values of Cell Church are:

- Jesus is at the centre,
- every member is contributing and growing,
- witness and evangelism can be through social events,
- cells are part of a larger whole: the building blocks of community.

Cells can have tasks such as study or care as their priorities; they are about personal growth and multiplication. All of this could prove to be a catalyst to get our churches back into a growth mode rather than a maintenance mode, with a shift in culture that will need to be carefully nurtured.

Could we achieve a 'Pastor in every Church?'

If so, should the pastor be a lay person, someone who is able to be the primary contact for the church in a particular place, someone who is able to take the lead in caring for others in the church community and the community beyond?

Should a 'Pastor in every Church' be somebody ordained, a kind of 'worker priest' who is LOCAL and equipped to celebrate the sacraments and conduct rites of passage? In the Orthodox Church a respected member of the village community is often chosen as its priest. This priest receives regular in-service training but continues to support himself financially as a shepherd or in some other form of rural occupation – is there here a model for us to adopt?

For discussion

1. Discuss the merits / demerits of Local Ministry Enabling teams. What would be the advantageous / disadvantageous of such a team in your context?
2. Cell Church is great tool for church growth. However, distance in the rural settings, and/or the safety of parishioners in townships where gangsterism is prevalent may be obstacles in effective Cell Church groups.

Discuss with special relevance to your situation.

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