

Churches Together in England Urban and Rural Forum Meeting

11 August 2017 at CTE Tavistock Square, London

Christians in urban and rural areas have discovered similarities and links across the different contexts in which they work. Following informal discussions about cross-overs and the implications for ministry, Churches Together in England convened and hosted a meeting for members of the Churches Rural Group and the Urban Forum. Chaired by Rev Dr David Cornick (General Secretary of CTE), it provided an opportunity to listen to one another's experience, share information and identify overlaps, common ground and potential areas for collaboration in future work. A number of common issues that have wider implications emerged from the case studies, stories and experiences shared.

1. Trends in society and changing contexts

- We are living in times of constant change, and where the speed of change is constantly increasing. This affects the culture and world in which we live, and also the capacity of the Churches to respond quickly and effectively to issues as they arise.
- Context is significant – but we should be thinking of 'issues' that are worked out differently in urban or rural contexts rather than particular 'urban' or 'rural' issues.

'Many issues are very similar in urban and rural settings. Small, self-contained 'village' communities exist within cities (though closer together than in the countryside). Poverty and deprivation are equally found, though the rural is in smaller pockets, and both more hidden to outside agencies and more obvious to individuals locally.' John Davis

- Churches and other religious organisations have had to come to terms with the switch from geographically to market based allegiances in recent decades, and the impact and implications for mission and ministry.

2. Identity

Much current social and economic change is being driven by people with a particular mindset, which is leaving others behind. The rise of populism and EU referendum revealed and heightened underlying divisions in society – Leave / Remain; North / South; right / left wing; London / rest of the country; those who are doing well / those who are left behind; anywhere / somewhere. Identity is increasingly bound up with membership of particular 'tribes.'

Religion and identity. Brexit showed a failure to understand what people are passionate or concerned about, and the Church needs to do more work on this. Resources from the Mission Theology Advisory Group can be found in the Social Engagement and Evangelism (SEE) series (Brexit) on <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/mission/mission-theology.aspx>

3. Power and powerlessness

Churches have traditionally had a role in speaking truth to power, providing a prophetic insight and giving a voice to the voiceless through their presence and engagement in marginalised communities as well as their roles in structures and places of influence. Many of the stories and examples mentioned alluded to this:

International Rural Churches Association (IRCA) aims to be a 'voice of the voiceless.' Spotting those who are marginalised and don't think they have a stake in society, coming alongside and listening helps them to feel valued. It is a Gospel of hope for the future. Roger Greene

Questions from an urban Area Dean and a distinctive deacon

How can we encourage churches that seem to be in 'survival mode' to engage with their communities, and speak into issues that go beyond internal debate – and to do so ecumenically or on an interfaith basis?

How do we speak truthfully and appropriately to people in positions of power without colluding with abuse of power?

What do we make of the Brexit debate and General Election, and how do we feed back what marginalised communities are feeling? Len Marsh and Terry Drummond

Reflection leads me to value highly the importance of being among and alongside the poor, giving voice to people who are marginalised, creating forums where people can look at issues together, and finding space to pause and read the signs of the time. s Richard Zipfer

4. Significant issues and places where things seem to fall apart

- **Poverty and deprivation.** A concern in all contexts, and seemingly impervious to initiatives and policies promoted by government at different levels.
- **Housing.** Provision of affordable (and / or rented and social) housing in urban and rural areas. Note was taken of the difficulties in using church land for this when guidelines require charities to get the best return for assets.
- **Food.** A range of issues around food: access to fresh food at reasonable prices, production costs for farmers, animal welfare, safety standards, supply chains, food security (with extra problems around climate change and Brexit), provision of food banks and the need for them.
- **Health.** Anxiety about inadequate funding, the current state and future of the NHS, despite admiration for those who work in it. Questions about what a healthy and flourishing community would look like, and how the Church/es can support this.
- **Overstretched professionals.** An issue for the NHS, social services, statutory authorities, education, clergy ... Working in partnerships can help to share the load, but it is difficult for those already under pressure to take the risk of trying this.
- **Racism.** Understanding the underlying anxieties that individuals and communities find difficult to express in ways that are considered acceptable. The need to engage and listen rather than being seen as accusing and judging.
- **Refugees and asylum seekers,** with linked issues about trafficking and exploitation.
- **Young People.** Engaging and motivating younger people in church and community life.

5. Models for effective Christian presence

We are not helpless in the face of these concerns! Churches have major advantages and resources that can be used to challenge and mitigate the worst effects of some of these issues.

Long-term commitment to an area. Longstanding presence in an area, existing relationships and commitment to the local community give insights and credibility when discussing issues and developing initiatives. Churches also have resources to offer, both in terms of buildings and

people. As part of the church, there is often a ‘givenness’ about relationships and a shared understanding about the history and nature of a place.

A small market town has poor provision for residential care. Staff from the relevant authorities were contacted and invited to visit the town to discuss better provision. The response was ‘Why would anyone want to live here?’ – ignoring the importance of being close to local networks of family and friends.

Elizabeth Clark

Chaplaincy. The chaplaincy model of engagement was strongly commended, although it was recognised that this is most effective when this model is understood and owned equally by the congregation rather than an expectation that the minister is primarily the ‘pastor of the gathered elect.’ Examples given included:

- Work on an inner-city estate in Leicester
- Agricultural chaplaincy in markets, shows, Farming Community Network
- Chaplaincy in airports, industries (including a pasty factory)
- Chaplaincy being an extension and enrichment of other work
- Capacity of this model to encourage others to develop wider vocations

‘Is this something I could do?’ asked a farmer / Reader having witnessed agricultural chaplaincy.

Richard Kirlew

Friendship, networking, building relationships and offering hospitality. The significance of building relationships with local churches, people and organisations was demonstrated through the shared experiences.

It is much easier to pick up the phone and talk to Brian than to a faceless and nameless official.

Chris Oxley

This slow, long-term building is the proper stuff of mission and ministry and equips us to deal with the ad hoc situations and crises when they arise.

Roger Greene

Urban and rural practitioners gave many examples of community use of the spaces provided by churches, from hospitality for multi-agency gatherings to specific projects to meet identified needs. The value of a safe and welcoming space should not be underestimated.

The church offered a venue for a lunch-time meeting of 28 different agencies working on the estate, and fruitful relationships developed. The value of this networking was demonstrated by a conversation over washing up about reducing teenage pregnancy, when the community centre offered space for a health centre colleague and funding was provided by a grant from another agency.

Chris Oxley

‘Everybody welcome’ was the 2017 theme for Rural Church Sunday, encouraging churches of all denominations to host community events and reflect on their welcome and hospitality.

But we also need to see the Church as a guest at other tables as well as a host. In today’s world, we need to work more with the Kingdom model, earn our place and right to be listened to and taken seriously in community and public arena.

Elizabeth Clark

Experience of working ecumenically and in partnerships, and identifying potential allies.

- Ecumenical and collaborative work in Liverpool and London around supporting asylum seekers and refugees, teaching English as a second language and the crisis in social care.
- Deanery (or diocesan) appointments of chaplains for agricultural markets.
- Experience of initiatives developed in inner city areas being adapted and expanded out into rural areas.
- Sponsorship of families being resettled in different areas
- Working with deanery groups and ‘Citizens’ or similar models for engagement in social justice issues.

Some points to note from experience:

- *the need to exercise discretion in identifying allies;*
- *the importance of setting up structures that do not fall apart when individuals move on;*
- *finding the right balance between ‘being church’ and ‘doing church’ in the community;*
- *practical ecumenical projects with a common purpose are more effective than discussing theology.*

Potential to reflect theologically – but there is need for a better theology to reflect on issues such as housing, austerity, poverty and the economy, and to rethink the implications for ministerial training and formation. There are some good examples of contextual placements, but this needs to be encouraged more widely

6. Constructive dialogue and the common good

A common concern was the division in society revealed by the recent referendum and General Election, and the tone of public debate and discourse. These raise issues about how to have meaningful dialogue between different groups who find it difficult to listen to or understand each other’s views and values – especially when some views may be extreme and hard to hear. Withdrawal from the EU is unlikely to solve problems in the way that people generally expected. Thought should be given to ways to handle disappointment and to channel the desire for something better into the language of and actions for the common good.

What sort of dialogue can we create? How can we encourage constructive engagement and see good in one another? Are there simple tools or resources that could be shared?

This could be taken up by CTE, who can provide ecumenical space and utilise the skills and expertise of other organisations working for reconciliation.

7. So what can I do? Some suggestions from the forum.

- Be informed – read something from the recommendations below (and add to the list).
- Build relationships locally, as (and with) individuals and organisations.
- Join / start campaigns - Sign the Social Care charter. See <http://www.thehopecharter.co.uk/>
- Find ways to engage in respectful dialogue with those who have different perspectives.
- Be a ‘*competent boundary spanner*’ (John Davis), encouraging thought and work outside silos.
- Think and work with others, and ecumenically, for the common good.
- Be aware (and beware) of stereotypes.
- Be attentive to the present and what is happening in the local context and community.

Recommendations for further reading

Supporting refugees and asylum seekers: https://consult.scotland.gov.uk/equality-unit/new-scots/supporting_documents/00515713.pdf

The Road to Somewhere: the Populist Revolt and the future of politics. David Goodhart. Hurst Publishers.

Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back. Matthew d'Ancona. Ebury Publishing

No is not enough. Naomi Klein. Allen Lane

The Rise of the Outsiders: how mainstream politics lost its way. Steve Richards. Atlantic

Parish; an Anglican Theology of place. Andrew Rumsey. SCM.

Those present:

Rev Dr David Cornick. *General Secretary of CTE and Chair of the meeting.*

Capt. Jim Currin, CA. *Evangelisation, Mission and Media staff member, Churches Together in England.*

Rev Canon Chris Oxley. *Currently priest in charge of the Avon-Swift Group of 11 small rural parishes in Leicester Diocese, and Chaplain to the Leicestershire Farming Community Network. Previously spent some years in Brussels, then 25 years in Leicester city (12 in an inner-city estate) before his current rural posting.*

Rev Dr John Davis. *Development Worker for Together Liverpool in the CUF Network and local councillor in West Lancashire Council. Previously Walsall Town Centre Chaplain and vicar of St Paul's for 12 years, and has wide experience in the VCFSE sector and the NHS.*

Rev Capt Terry Drummond CA. *Recently ordained distinctive deacon in the diocese of Southwark after serving as Bishop's Chaplain and Public Policy Adviser to the Bishop of Southwark; a Church Army Captain, with experience of relating faith to politics and public life in a variety of roles, and currently researching for a PhD in Urban Theology.*

Rev Richard Kirlew. *Currently Chair of the Agricultural Chaplains Association, Team Vicar in the Three Valleys Benefice of 18 small parishes in Sherbourne Deanery (house for duty) and Deanery Markets Chaplain (including Salisbury Livestock Market).*

Rev Len Marsh. *Vicar of All Saints with St Margaret, Upper Norwood, and Area Dean of Croydon North in the Diocese of Southwark.*

Rev Elizabeth Clark. *National Rural Officer for the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, based at Germinate: Arthur Rank Centre. She has had experience of urban and rural ministry, including a posting in the North Yorkshire Coastal Methodist Circuit.*

Rev Tom Hurcombe. *Previously industrial missionary, and a vicar in North Croydon.*

John Murphy. *Convenor of the London Churches Refugee Network, and a trustee of the London Churches Refugee Fund.*

Rev Roger Greene. *Retired Methodist minister, currently living in Cornwall with a chaplaincy role and CRG (Churches Rural Group) representative in IRCA. Previous Chair of Agricultural Chaplains Association:*

Richard Zipfel. *Long involvement in London Citizens; Adviser to the Catholic Bishops' Conference, member of the Catholic Association for Racial Justice, Christian Coalition for Urban Mission.*

Ann Wright. *CRG representative on IRCA-Europe, Secretary of Social Responsibility Network and Industrial Christian Fellowship, and a previous Mothers' Union Diocesan President in Southwark.*