

Mission and Discipleship in a Rural Context – Barry Osborne

This paper is based upon a talk that was given at an event organised by the Diocese of Oxford in November 2011. I was pleased to accept this invitation as the topic is one that is dear to my heart and is an area of work in which I have been engaged for over 40 years. It seemed to me that the most helpful way of tackling this would be to spend some time in exploring the three elements in the title systematically.

We start by exploring the rural context. The rural areas of the UK are unique in a number of ways, not least in the fact that there has been a net inward migration for several years. Around 90% of the UK is rural and although population statistics published by the Government include discrete communities up to 10,000 I prefer to ignore those that are over 5,000. However that leaves us with about 17 million people or one sixth of our population. The majority of these tend to live in the smaller villages¹.

The people living in rural England today include a wide cross section of the population, though there is only a small presence of ethnic minorities. Today those who might have some claim to be indigenous country dwellers are in a minority as country properties have been purchased by those migrating from towns and cities. However, they remain a significant presence alongside a variety of people groups including historic land owners, various celebrities that have acquired large estates, the agricultural and forestry community, those who have retired into the countryside, commuters, the movers and shakers in commerce, second-home owners, and those seeking a more self-sustainable life growing their own vegetables, keeping chicken and such.

Today, most of those that live in the rural areas do so as a life-style choice in which they have often invested substantial money. They include the most influential people in society. Recent research by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne² revealed that the top fifth of the UK's population in terms of income live in the rural areas and the lowest fifth are hardly present in the rural areas. This enormous social change has resulted in a loss of local amenities such as village shops and transport. At the same time many village schools and pubs have also gone. Often the churches are the only remaining amenity in villages.

A study of demographics in Oxfordshire produced some interesting information. For example the percentage of people of wage earning age is much lower in rural areas than in the city and larger towns. At the same time there is a higher percentage of both children and people of retirement age³. This is illustrated in the following diagrams.

¹ Data supplied direct from the Office for National Statistics

² Prof. Mark Shucksmith, Faith in the Countryside Conference 2010

³ ONS Regional Trends Report, timeline September 2010

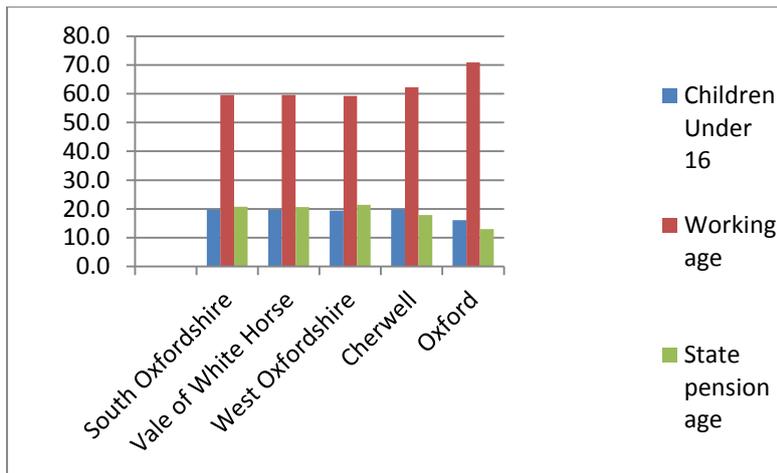


Figure 1: Percentage of population in different age bands in Oxfordshire Districts.

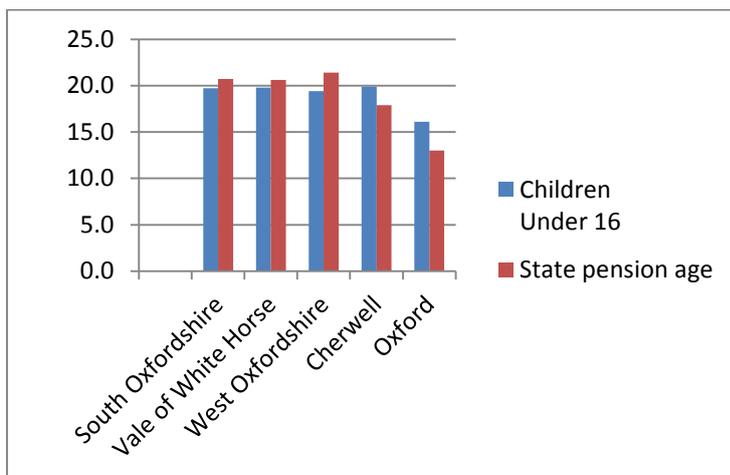


Figure 2: percentage of population below 16 and over pension age by districts on Oxfordshire.

It was also interesting to note the distribution of county population across different settlement sizes. In the West Oxfordshire District⁴ we find that 42% of the population live in 3 settlements larger than 5,000. By contrast 20% live in the 61 settlements with fewer than 1,000 people, while another 21% of the population live in the 14 settlements between 1,000 and 2,000.

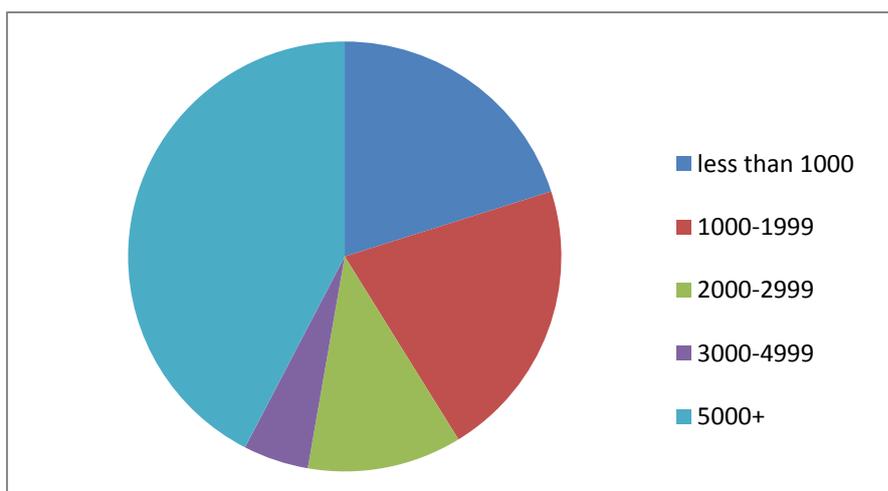


Figure 3: West Oxfordshire population distribution by settlement size.

⁴ Censis 2001, Results for West Oxfordshire, published by West Oxfordshire District Council

If we look in greater detail at those 61 settlements that have fewer than 1000 residents (with 20% of the District's population) we discover that one person in six lives in 31 of these where the population is fewer than 200.

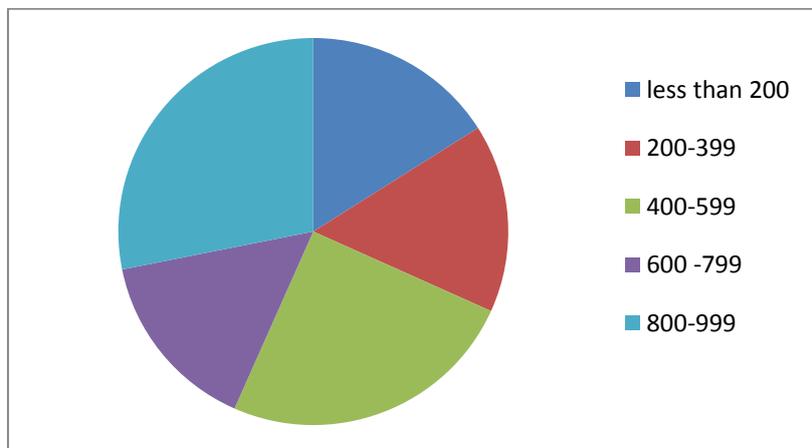


Figure 4: West Oxfordshire 'small village' population distribution by settlement size.

The steady inward migration alongside other social change has led some villages to become far more sub-urban in character. While many villages have retained a strong sense of community, others are more like satellites to nearby conurbations.

No two villages are exactly alike. Each is affected by size and shape of the developed village, its proximity to the nearest towns or cities, its socio-economic history, the degree of incomer influence, and the degree and nature of local social networking. Thirty years ago observers of rural society identified a number of behavioural traits, some of which are still relevant in many of the less suburbanised villages today. These include conservatism, caution, insularity, suspicion towards people and things that are from 'outside', limited imagination, intransigence, and diffidence. Much of this could be described as aspects of parochialism. In any village both the number of traits and their degree of intensity will vary, if they are there at all today.

Over the last few decades as the rural population has grown and changed change has also taken place within the churches in rural areas. Approximately 63% (possibly more) of the churches in rural England are Church of England. Methodists are the second largest presence with around 26% of churches. Baptists are the third largest presence but account for no more than 5% of the churches. The remainder include United Reformed churches, continuing Congregational Churches, Catholics and a few others. In the main the development of new charismatic churches tends to be an urban phenomenon. The Salvation Army and traditional Pentecostal churches are also rare in the countryside.

In common with other contexts in the UK, church attendances declined, though the Church of England now reports that this has bottomed out in rural areas. In the Church of England churches have been clustered together, clergy numbers have reduced, and both the frequency and variety of church services have reduced as clergy seek to serve all the churches in the benefice. Some rural Parish Churches now have only one service a month. At the same time the number of Free Churches in rural areas has declined enormously. Between 1963 and 1973 one denomination closed 3,000 places of worship (many in villages); another denomination sold off 10% of their church buildings in one year (many in villages).

This has contributed to people commuting to worship outside their village, often to larger more lively churches in towns. Not only does this erode the quality of the witness and life of the village churches it is also open to be interpreted as a comment on the value of the village churches that are by-passed.

But there is much good news among rural churches. This is especially true where those responsible for ministry and leadership locally recognise the distinctive qualities of village churches (tangerines are not small oranges) and work with their strengths. Numerous stories tell of the benefits of embracing change, of lay participation, and of new ways of being church and doing mission.

Before concluding this section about the *rural context*, it is worth reflecting on rural spirituality fifty years ago and now. Fifty years ago going to church was normal, non-conformity church presence was strong, non-Christian beliefs/practices were seen as weird, there was only inherited patterns of worship, and faith was demonstrated and measured by commitment to the institutional structures. Today, the members of the village community see the Church as belongs to them to be used when needed, Church is seen as non-essential to faith, marginal and hybrid forms of faith are praiseworthy; only traditional Christians are weird, faith is no longer rooted in scripture, and one cannot evaluate or judge customised faith systems.

What of discipleship in the rural context? Discipleship appears to be a popular theme across the denominations at the present time. But it is understood in different ways. Some see it more as the development of a deeper personal spiritual life in terms of devotion and holiness. Others see it more as commitment expressed in activity. The question this then raises is whether discipleship in a rural context is any different to that in an urban context. The former expression of discipleship will not vary but perhaps the latter would to some extent.

I find myself somewhat unhappy about certain ways in which the activist aspect discipleship is represented. Some are harshly militaristic in their model which, it seems to me, contrasts with the style of Jesus and how he related to his disciples. I am reminded of the wise words of a former Bishop of Lewes who, when addressing a meeting of Christians considering engaging in a model of evangelism that smacked rather of show business and circus, said that if the Carpenter of Nazareth would seem strangely out of place in the midst of all they were planning to do, then all they were planning to do had nothing to do with God!

Jesus developed his disciples by having them live and work alongside him. He was the model they were expected to emulate. There was no intensive training course or pressured programme. Not even a basic Bible study course! Probably one of the most helpful passages of scripture on this subject comes from Matthew 10:24/25:

“The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord.” (KJV)

I have used the KJV here in preference to some modern translations which use ‘student’ and ‘teacher’, though that is valid translation from the Greek. However, it immediately reinforces the sense of classroom and instruction. The image of apprenticeship is probably more helpful in our context and the use of the term mentoring. While the discipling that Jesus did was effective it was more subtle than is often the case in some churches today.

In his exhortation to his disciples that they should go and make disciples I suspect Jesus had in mind that they would emulate his system. It is interesting to note that where teaching is referred to in

Matthew 28:19, 20 it appears the teaching is to follow their becoming disciples. It was not a means to that end. Matthew more than the other three writers of the Gospels employs the term disciple for those who followed Jesus. While it is arguable that Matthew has in mind the twelve, other Gospel writers make it clear that there were more than this. Luke tells us that the twelve who became designated as apostles were selected from “among the disciples”⁵. John tells us of an occasion when many of his disciples (other than the twelve) turned back from following him⁶. Once when addressing a large crowd that was following him Jesus spelled out the cost of discipleship. This would have been nonsense if the number of disciples of Jesus at that time was limited to twelve. Then there are the seventy two whom Jesus sent out. And the 120 ‘believers’ who gathered post resurrection and from whom Matthias was chosen to take the place left by Judas.

It would therefore seem that the term disciple was used commonly for followers of Jesus, though it was also shorthand in referring to the twelve. Indeed, all four writers use the expression ‘*the twelve*’ in order to differentiate them from other disciples. The account of the early church in Acts is interesting in that the term disciple is used more often to describe a follower of Jesus than the term believer and Christian put together. We read of ‘*the twelve*’ calling the rest of the disciples together⁷, and of the number of disciples increasing.

But the concept of followers of Jesus being disciples has largely disappeared from most UK churches today. We use the term Christian liberally and also speak of believers, but few would dream of designating their congregation as a body of disciples! I find myself wondering whether much of the evangelism in the twentieth century has been wasted as we have preached to make believers rather than disciples.

Of course the two expressions of discipleship referred to above are complementary, as indeed are the four different ways in which the ‘Great Commission’ is expressed. In Matthew we read “Go and make disciples of all nations...”⁸ In Mark we read, “Go into all the world and preach the good news...”⁹ Luke’s account is in the beginning of Acts where Jesus tells his disciples, “You will be my witnesses...”¹⁰ And John has Jesus stating, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”¹¹. Each of these is unique but they are not four separate elements. They are four aspects of the same command.

Two of these require some further comment. The term *witnesses*’ used in Acts is often used as an alternative to evangelism. Some people wrongly refer to their lives being a silent witness, or the church presence being a witness. But if the biblical grounds for such a statement is this passage in Acts we are inadequately understanding the Greek word *marturia*, for this is essentially about testifying. Yes, our lives should be consistent with our testimony. Yes, we are called to be salt and light. But there is no biblical justification for claiming some exemption from telling the story by living a nice life.

⁵ Luke 6:13

⁶ John 6:60-68

⁷ Acts 6:1,2

⁸ Matthew 28:19,20

⁹ Mark 16:15

¹⁰ Acts 1:8

¹¹ John 20:21

The Johannine version of the Commission also requires some further exegesis. The Greek word translated here 'as' in "As the Father has sent me..." is *kathos* and carries the meaning 'in the same way' or 'in the same manner'. What Jesus is not saying is "I was sent and now I'm sending you". We need to dig deeper. There are aspects of humility, serving, incarnation, caring, exemplifying, and sacrificing, and more implicit here.

To proclaim the gospel without testifying about Jesus or calling people to follow Jesus as his disciples makes no sense. To respond to the Commission in any other manner than that of Jesus is to provide a false representation. We are back to the issue of our activity having integrity to the Carpenter of Nazareth as revealed in scripture.

So we are already beginning to see that discipleship and mission are inseparably linked. But to the two expressions of discipleship (devotion and action) I wish to add a third. Paul expresses the life of the church as a body made up of many members, each differing to some degree in kind or manner of operation¹². Each Christian therefore has a function to fulfil that is related to God's personalised purpose and gifting for them. An aim of discipleship should surely be seeking to work out that particular purpose God has in calling us to himself. By implication this should be lived out both in union with fellow disciples rather than individually, and through the normality of our everyday lives rather than an alternative life. None of that will be possible without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

I now turn to the issue of mission. Mission should never be used as a substitute for the word *evangelism*. Evangelism is an aspect of mission, but the words cannot be used interchangeably without something being lost. In 1984, because the term *evangelism* had already lost some credibility, the Billy Graham Organisation and their UK planning committee did use the word *mission* in that way. That particular outreach was called *Mission England* and gave birth to the song book *Mission Praise*.

I am equally concerned that a significant person within the Church of England's mission activities who informed me that "we now use the term *discipling* instead of *evangelising*". I wish that people would work for the rehabilitation of the term *evangelism* instead of substituting other terms that have different meaning. Evangelism is simply about telling the story of Jesus. It is an essential ministry of the Christian Church. The best way to make it acceptable is to teach and practise it properly and not be ashamed of naming bad practise for what it is. This includes manipulative preaching, attempts to terrify people into the kingdom, and extended appeals that look more like an auctioneer squeezing out the last pound than the gentle invitation of Christ.

As with all gifts of the Spirit and of Christ¹³ there are different ways in which they serve and different degrees to which they are used. A serious piece of work by Peter Wagner of the Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena suggests that between 5 and 10 percent of Christians have the gift of evangelism¹⁴. Examining my congregations in three pastorates I found that to be true, but not all would be comfortable preaching, and not one was anything like Billy Graham. Perhaps if we took seriously learning about good practise in evangelism and teaching that to others people might feel more comfortable with the word.

¹² 1Corinthians 12

¹³ Ephesians 4:11-13

¹⁴ <http://biblestudyforlife.wordpress.com/2011/09/19/wagner-on-the-gift-of-evangelism-warning-long-post/>

But, as I have already stated, evangelism and mission are not the same thing. Mission is wonderfully defined in the statement adopted largely throughout the Anglican Communion and other traditions since 1990. This is known as the five marks for mission. They sum up the holistic nature of mission as:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

It should be noted that this is not a picking list from which we select those aspects we find less inconvenient. But neither is it intended to be a list for which every individual Christian has to assume responsibility. Rather it expresses the task to which the Church is called. But it is also a list against which every local church would do well to check its activities and the stewardship of its resources. It is not hierarchical, although it is suggested that the final three on the list flow from the working out of the first two.

In rural areas we seem to do well with responding to human need, and perhaps not too badly dealing with structures of society. Indeed some recent research demonstrated that the churches in rural areas are by far the largest contributors to social capital in the communities where they exist¹⁵. Members of rural churches probably have a better perspective of the environment and a commitment to its quality. However that is not fully what is meant by the final item on the list. But most seem to be striving to do well on that point.

Without wishing to be complacent about those aspects of mission I now turn to the other two aspects of mission. Firstly, I want to consider the task of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom. A recent fairly simple survey I conducted asked a number of key people within the Rural Evangelism Network, who represent national Churches either at national or intermediate level, their observation and opinions about activity in intentional proclamatory evangelism. I used two adjectives to qualify evangelism because of my awareness that there is prevalence in rural churches to believe that to actually seek to share our faith in the hope of encouraging others to follow Christ is inappropriate in rural communities. Two thirds of these indicated that their personal inclination was to see evangelism as implicit rather than explicit, even though 79% of the respondents were responsible for encouraging evangelism within their denominations. Around half of the respondents were able to identify some village churches that had engaged in more overt evangelism.

What was particularly interesting was a section on what might inhibit the proclamation of the Good News in a rural context. Well over half the respondents stated that those who make up rural congregations had no personal engagement with the gospel story, and consequently no confidence in sharing that story with others. It was not surprising to find that the same number felt that rural church attenders generally had little or a poor understanding of evangelism.

Yet the same survey produced evidence that there were some rural churches engaging in evangelism in ways that were apparently appropriate and effective leading to increased attendances at services and church activities, and in around 20% of situations leading to personal conversion.

¹⁵ Social capital in Rural Places, a report to Defra by the Rural Evidence Research Centre, 2007

Up until the last quarter of the twentieth century evangelism was seen as the prerogative of specialist organisations and individuals who were the agents of evangelism. Today, the combined resources of such agents with some commitment to working in rural areas in the UK could reach no more than 2% of the population. Yet, scattered across the countryside, there remain thousands of village churches entrusted by God with the task of sharing in his mission. But what is to be done if those within the churches are not excited by the person of Jesus and the relevance of his life, death and resurrection for them personally?

Another aspect of concern is that where there are clergy and other church leaders who have a heart for encouraging engagement in evangelism they often find themselves feeling that their hands are already full and that the available human resources are extremely limited. Such is the sensitive nature of rural communities and our churches that we are often reluctant to take risks by inviting outside help either from other village churches or specialist mission agencies.

One further aspect that causes me concern is that often mission initiatives coming out of denominational offices seem to encourage everyone to be evangelists. But if, as Wagner proposed, only between 5 and 10 percent of Christians have the gift of evangelism then there is risk in trying to encourage Christians to undertake activity that is bound to be unnatural to them. Furthermore, if we fail to recognise the diversity of gifts within our churches and find ways of employing them in common tasks of mission we are neglecting a resource that God has given us. For if the God of mission is also a God who gives diverse gifts to his people then learning how to discover, develop and deploy them in mission has to be important to us.

This belief has been an undergirding theological concept for my own particular work of encouraging rural churches to be missional. My dream is to see village churches that are truly missional where each member understands his or her gifting and where that fits within a holistic programme of mission tailored to both fit and suit the local situation.

Part of this includes resources to help rural Christians to find fresh inspiration from the gospel story in the scriptures. Other aspects are developmental and fall under four broad headings. These might typically be addressed in a Church Away Day or a series of such activities.

The first stage is to create a common understanding of mission and evangelism. I have yet to find a church of any theological flavour where there is already a common understanding. Indeed in some churches people are amazed at the divergence of views. Part of this stage in the process is to create a broad understanding of the *missio dei* (mission of God), to explore individual roles within God's mission and how the resources of the church enable the development of mission strategies that respond to local needs and opportunities.

The first stage also addresses some of those problems regarding the image of evangelism, to explore the different ways by which God speaks into the lives of the different people that make up the local church, and to identify various aspects of personal faith. This is done through a carefully led series of interactive personal and group exercises. Always the outcomes from these exercises are surprising and enriching to those taking part.

The second stage is to review the activities of the local church and how its various resources are currently used. We then reflect on God's call to mission and how that fits into the life of the church, and what it might look like in an ideal situation. Again we employ interactive elements.

The third stage is to develop some appropriate strategies. These should be appropriate to the context in which the church is set, appropriate to the resources God has already placed at the disposal of the local church, and appropriate to what the members of the church feel God might be saying and doing among them at the present time. A variety of interactive group exercises are also employed at this stage.

The fourth and final stage is to plan how any new mission strategies will be put into action. But this will already be introducing change, and change needs to be managed, so we also address this subject.

But just as every village and church is to some degree unique, the process of developing missional churches is not a specific programme but will require adaptation if it is to be effective.

Developing missional rural churches is not an abstract theory. I have seen the benefits in churches and communities where I have been the minister. Not only does this bring together the concepts of discipleship and mission it also provides a Christian community that becomes a useful illustration of the gospel itself, a sign and symbol of the kingdom of God.

In drawing to a close this reflection on discipleship and mission in a rural context I would like to share a few additional reflections.

Evangelism in a rural context is more effective where

- The methods are culturally relevant for the people we seek to reach
- The local church is held in respect
- Our activities are a natural expression of a caring Christian community
- We carefully contextualise our activity and message so that it responds to the social traits of local rural life
- Those involved are known in the community rather than imported
- It is not too “loud”. Gentle consistent low-key outreach is better than high profile activities.

Evangelism in a rural context is less effective where

- The church congregation is not drawn from the local community
- It is not in the context of the other four “marks of mission”
- The church does not demonstrate genuine interest in the life of the wider community
- It appears to be generated by self-interest
- Methods are inappropriate to the local rural context

In today’s rural context, bearing in mind contemporary spirituality, might it be better to challenge people not with a set of *beliefs* but with a set of *values*. One church known to me has deliberately redefined itself in this way and used it to inform its mission. Their statement reads

We value all individuals, young and old, male and female, regardless of wealth, ability, or standing in society. We value communities in which individuals care for one another. We value the kind of love that puts other people’s needs before our own.

We value justice for all people and long for a world where there is greater fairness and equality. We value truth. We value kindness and compassion. We value deeds more than empty words.

We value the peace that comes from respect for other people who might be different from us in some way. We value the kind of unity that can also celebrate diversity. In other words we value the kind of world about which Jesus taught and for which he gave his life.

The same church also uses a *Covenant of Fellowship* to express what it means to be part of the local church. At the start of each calendar year people of sufficient age to understand what it means are invited to sign their name underneath the following words as a sign of their renewed commitment in a body of Christian disciples. It reads

“In response to God's gracious promises and commands, we covenant to walk together in all the ways of the Lord, as he has revealed them or will reveal them through his Spirit and through the scriptures.

“We freely and gladly bind ourselves, his grace enabling us, to live in loving communion with one another as becomes members of a church of Christ.”

If either or both the values statement and the covenant prove helpful, the reader is welcome to use or adapt them to suit their own situation.

At the close of the event that occasioned the writing of this paper I was invited to lead the prayers. I preceded that by reference to the feeding of the 5,000 as recorded by John. In this account Philip is overwhelmed by the enormity of the need and tells Jesus that it would take eight month's wages for everyone to have just a bite. Andrew finds some resources but sees this as far too small. John, in his account of this event tells us that Jesus already knows what he is going to do.

Encouraging mission and discipleship in a rural context is God's agenda. We need to recognise the need, feel something of his heart of compassion, bring what we have to him, and then follow his guidance. For he already knows what he is going to do - once he has our attention and our willing cooperation.