

Why Choose a Tailored Approach to Mission?

We live in times when people are more inclined to go for the quick fix and the easy option. When it comes to mission, there are various simple options to choose from, or we could even go for an easier option and invite in an expert from outside to do it for us. But are there down sides to these choices, and there is a better way?

I spent 25 years as an evangelist working by invitation with rural churches of various denominations, various sizes and various parts of the UK. While the short high impact missions I eventually realised that there were long term drawbacks for the churches that invited us. Further theological reflection and University studies in management led me to develop processes for tailoring mission that would lead to a comfortable fit and an unembarrassing style of mission to suit any church.

It is not a package, such as Alpha (though for some churches Alpha could be part of the tailored outcome). It is, instead a process that engages the hearts and minds of all who form the regular congregation. If undertaken carefully the outcomes are sustainable and exciting. The process has been tried and proved in both Anglican and Free Church contexts.

STEP ONE- UNDERSTANDING THE CLIENT

A good tailor will take time to get to know his or her customer, their likes and dislikes, good and bad past clothing experiences, and, of course, the shape of their body, We in Rural Mission Solutions, recognise that no two churches and their contexts are exactly the same. So we take time to get to know any church that invites us to work with them. We spend time listening, and will be quick to affirm good practise from the past or present.

Every church contains a mix of people with different faith journeys, different attitudes and values, different gifts, different life experiences, and different personalities. These are the people who make up the church. Taking time to understand these is our essential first step. As we listen, there is often a useful additional outcome as the members of the church discover more about themselves.

STEP TWO - UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Each village or country town has its own distinct character. Various factors interrelate to determine that character. These include, its size and shape, its location in relation to other villages and nearby towns, its history, its economic life, its political life, among other factors.

A village is much more than a collection of houses. There are social threads that weave among various local organisations. Some of these may have given rise to local traditions, and there is often a clear collective identity.

Some villages have changed little over the years. Others have become sub-urbanised with the majority of those living there being first generation villagers. Most are a mix of the two.

Importantly, we need to consider how the church or churches fit into this context. Opinions vary both inside and outside the church, but these opinions matter and are an important part of the 'getting to know' process.

STEP THREE - UNDERSTANDING MISSION

Word like *evangelism* and *mission* come loaded with assorted meanings for the various people who make up the church. Some of these will be positive for some people; others will have negative associations. So time needs to be given to exploring exactly what these words mean to those who make up the church.

There are more expressions of mission than there are colours in a rainbow. We understand that there are some people who love reds and yellows but hate blues, while some people love blue but hate red. So we are back to careful listening.

The name, *Rural Mission Solutions* implies that there is more than one way. Our signpost logo emphasises the point. We have no interest in promoting any particular method or style. Instead we work with each church using careful processes to discover expressions of mission that are *right* for each church. What is right for one church might be very different to another. That is why it is a tailored approach.

A competent tailor will always work with his or her client, drawing on their own experience, knowledge and skills - but never imposing.

MAKING A START

The most important first step for a church is developing confidence in the '*tailor*'. Despite our many years and breadth of experience working with churches of all shapes and flavours, we never presume that a new church contact will mean that everyone will be instantly happy for us to work with them.

For this reason we always encourage churches to take time getting to know us. Usually, there is an initial meeting with those in leadership in any form within the church. Sometimes this starts with a meeting with the clergy only, but we encourage creating an opportunity for others to meet with us to. We are happy to be '*grilled*' about our processes, beliefs, experiences, and more. In fact the more searching the enquiry the happier we will be.

If that meeting has gone well, we encourage an opportunity to spend some time with as many in the church as possible. One ideal way to do this is for an Away-Day or Half-Day where some of the principles described above can be explained with practical applications with plenty of dialogue. The process of tailoring will have begun. How that develops would be entirely for the church to decide.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

The aim of the 'tailored' approach is to arrive at a strategy or strategies that work well whatever your size, and achieve whatever mission targets you set. Because the process also aims to determine a style with which the whole church will feel comfortable, it creates a sense of shared vision and purpose which is highly motivating.

We believe that mission is something that should involve all who are part of the local church, while respecting the diversity of personalities, spiritual experience, gifts and talents, and other variants.

By contrast, programmes undertaken to satisfy the aspirations of only a section of the church, can prove divisive. Some will rejoice in what is, for them, a positive experience, others may actually be discouraged. Pastoral wisdom is called for.

Short-term high impact programmes using specialist personnel can achieve encouraging results (Most of the several hundreds of mission of this kind in which I was previously involved were apparently effective). However, they are difficult to follow up, which can cause discontentment. Highs are often followed by lows.

The tailored process is developmental and creates a model that can be applied in part or whole to other aspects of church life. Done well, the actual process is as valuable as the outcomes it achieves.

SINGLE CHURCH OR CLUSTER (e.g. MPB or Circuit)

The aim is to arrive at a mission strategy that is right for one church. However, it is possible to work with a group of churches in a way that enables each church involved to develop their own distinct outcome.

DOING IT YOURSELF OR DOING IT WITH RURAL MISSION SOLUTIONS

While *Rural Mission Solutions* will supply a church leader with the tools that are needed, tailoring is a skill that is developed over years of practise. Drawing on those developed skills make sense unless there is good reason for not doing so.

Sometimes a fresh voice is more effective even if it is saying what a local person has been saying for some time! Many years of experience in settled ministry will enable a staff member from *Rural Mission Solutions* to act sympathetically and empathetically when working with a rural or small church.

Another alternative, where there is a group of churches, is to invite *Rural Mission Solutions* to lead the process with one church, and for local leaders to use the process and tools for other churches at a subsequent time on a DIY basis.

COST AND TIME

The process of tailoring mission strategies is adaptive and flexible. Different churches progress at different speeds. The minimum time required is the equivalent of a typical Away Day (e.g. six hours including lunch break and two short worship sessions). Both the pace and the time taken is determined by the inviting church. The process is taken one step at a time with no obligation.

Because *Rural Mission Solutions* is dedicated to helping smaller churches, it has always been our policy not to make a charge. It is hoped that a donation to defray costs, including travel and accommodation if necessary, would be given. No church should make cost a criteria for deciding whether to pursue what would undoubtedly be of great benefit to them.

WHAT NOW?

Mission is not an option. Our God is a God of mission who calls us to share in this. In small, often close-knit communities, venturing into mission calls for some courage and faith. In village life, getting it wrong can have long lasting problems. For this reason we advise that you take time to reflect both carefully and prayerfully when thinking about mission, its impact in the church and in the wider community.

Please feel free to call on us if you think we can help in any way, without obligation or cost. You can reach us at the Centre for Rural Mission, 4 Clarence Street, Market Harborough, LE16 7NE. Email: rms@ruralmissions.org.uk. Telephone 07720 322 213.