

RTA Newsletter

February 2007

Chairman's remarks:

We had a stimulating conference at St Rita's Honiton at the end of November last year with a gathering of 43 rural enthusiasts. Enjoying generous Roman Catholic hospitality, a warm friendly welcome from Fr Gerald and his team with plenty of good food and drink, we also had much to sustain our mind and spirit.

The theme was 'Rural Mission- Right Theology' and the conference explored the idea and realities of a mission shaped church in rural areas. Dr Pete Atkins, one of the leaders of Threshold Church in Lincolnshire and a pioneer of the Mission shaped Ministry course which is being promoted across the country by the national Fresh Expressions Team, was a lively and provocative speaker. He unfolded the story of Threshold as a network church meeting in small congregations across a wide stretch of rural Lincolnshire which gathered at seasonal intervals for larger celebrations. He then highlighted the principles of this cell-like church – of which, maintaining good ecumenical relationships was a high priority.

The Right Reverend Michael Langrish (Bishop of Exeter) then joined us for an interview just before lunch. He was able to give an overview of the Church's positive effect in rural Britain as well as sharing the Diocese of Exeter's strategy for a growing church with a transformational impact in local communities. There was a very interesting engagement between Bishop Michael and Dr Pete Atkins which started to explore the differing ecclesiology between an episcopal church and a 'new' church. Indeed, there was genuine disappointment when we had to stop for lunch. Needless to say, animated and passionate discussion continued over the dinner table as friendships were made and renewed.

It was a great privilege to have Professor Leslie Francis presiding over our gathering with his usual wisdom and dry wit and good to know that he is willing to do it for yet another year! Our conference this year will be from 23rd -24th November at St. Deinols Library, Hawarden in north Wales where I hope many of you will join us to explore the theme: 'Changing Countryside, Changing Church'.

My thanks to Stephen, our secretary, for his customary efficiency and stimulating comment. Also, to Jim Mynors for collating an interesting round up of reports from RTA Groups across the country.

Mark Rylands

COPE'S COMMENT: ANOTHER ACRONYM... CERN

For reasons best known to everyone else, your Secretary now finds himself as a member of the Executive of CERN, which is the Churches European Rural Network. I was fortunate to have been part-sponsored by the RTA to attend a meeting of CERN at Čelákovice (Czech Republic) last October, as part of the English delegation invited through CRG (the Churches Rural Group) – where I represent RTA, to take the acronyms full circle.

There is much to be learnt, but perhaps the most important thing to realise is how much we, the British, can offer to the rest of Europe in the light of our extensive experience of rural and farming crisis. Also to note was the extreme difference in experience throughout Europe, and especially throughout what will be by the time you read this the European Union.

Perhaps the saddest element was that, although invited, churches from the European south-west were not represented. Elsewhere, countries emerging from Communist regimes were suffering difficulty because their recent history had rendered them unable to make local decisions, as local decision-making had been abandoned during the time their farms had been collectives.

Further to the south and east, the countries that have just joined the EU in 2007 are so far adrift of modern techniques that they still effectively had two cows and a pig per farmer, and were now experiencing rural depopulation equivalent to that here in the industrial revolution, because (of course) two cows and a pig can no longer make a living.

Conversely, the Danish delegate said that there were literally no farmers at all in his villages as all the land was run by agribusiness. Later on, I learnt that the word 'rurban' had long since been coined for those parts of western Europe where traditional farming had been driven out.

As an example of how systems have been failing, in certain (perhaps more religious) countries towards the east such as Lithuania and Romania, the government and its systems have become so distrusted that the only organisation which the local population trusts to deliver local programmes is the church. However, certainly in Lithuania, the leadership of the church (majority Roman Catholic) was suffering the same shrinkage in vocations which could be seen, for example, in France; and thus the church was unable properly to fulfil the role which the people had given it.

Where we were able to demonstrate the potential for help was firstly in the Arthur Rank Centre. None of the other nations had a central/centralised organisation dealing exclusively with the rural church situation, although Germany did have this sort of thing on a regional and denominational basis. Having a single voice to address rural church issues with would be of great benefit to many of the nations represented.

And secondly, Farm Crisis Network, the Agricultural Chaplains Association, and the ARC-Addington Fund would be ideally suited for dealing with, for example, the crisis in Polish agriculture, which appears to be going through the same shake-up as we have experienced at a much, much faster rate, with medium and small farms going to the wall at a very fast rate. Interesting to remember that FCN itself was founded through co-operation with a similar organisation in a part of Germany, and that this very co-operation was among the seeds which brought CERN into being.

We also learnt that the Conference of European Churches (CEC/KEK, depending on your language!), with bases at Strasbourg and Geneva, had commissioned oikos, a Dutch research organisation, to investigate issues of food security and justice in the expanded EU, and we chewed over some of this. It was interesting that, for some, 'local food security' meant 'grown in Europe'. Also, care farming is alive and well in Lithuania, Switzerland and Germany.

CERN, hitherto a relatively-informal network, is seeking to establish a proper constitution and registration, so that future work (e.g. the expansion of FCN-like help) could be eligible for EU grants, though it must be noted that CERN is pan-European, not merely EU-bounded. I am honoured to be part of its Executive, and yes, the reason is that I am bilingual in English and German, our main working languages.

Reports from RTA Groups around the country

These reports are all now on www.rural-theology.org.uk/localgroups

Cheshire

Hopes and Fears February 2004
Social Capitalism November 2004
Mission-shaped church May 2005
The Cheshire Rural helpline Nov 2005
Stewardship June 2006

Devon

Climate Change October 2004
Organic Farm visit July 2006
RURCON in Africa October 2006
Fresh Expressions February 2006
Presence October 2005

Hampshire

Dairy Barn Farm July 2005
Rural Ministry April 2004
Multi Parish Benefices October 2005
Rural Parishes Feb 2006

Northants & Leics

Farming and Synod March 2004
Green and Pleasant 15.10.05
Rural Idyll and the Kingdom of Christ
January 2004
Green and Pleasant 14.10.05

Oxon

Healthy Rural Churches May 2006
Presence April 2005
Pilgrim Places April 2004
Presence Oct 05

Welsh Marches

Art in the community July 2006
Community July 2005
Mission and Ministry March 2006
Seasonal Worship & CRES March 2005
Being Church in the Countryside July 2004
Land Tax March 2004
Politics, Policies & Rural People Oct 2006
Small Churches October 2005

East Anglia

25 years of RTA October 2006
Coastal Erosion June 2005
Country Vicar March 2006
Farming History & Conservation June
2006
New appointment March 2004
Change October 2003
Country Churches March 2005
Evangelism October 2004
Food and Farming June 2004

Notts & Lincs

Food March 2005
Rural theology & empirical perspectives
July 2005
Rural Ministry 21st Century Oct 05

Sussex

Climate Soil and the Jesus Lifestyle April
2005

Wilts & Dorset

Care Farming October 2006
Ploughing a Different Furrow September
2003
Wind Farms May 2005
Climate Change October 2004
Single Farm Payments May 2006

Worcs

BIOMASS May 2006
Migrant Workers November 2006
Creation Spirituality June 2005
Seasonal Worship October 2005

Yorks

Presence January 2005

Recent meetings:

East Anglia - RTA Reunion at the Giddings 18 October 2006 Photo at:

[http://www.rural-theology.org.uk/localgroups/eastanglia/images/Little_Gidding_\(Small\).JPG](http://www.rural-theology.org.uk/localgroups/eastanglia/images/Little_Gidding_(Small).JPG)

In the 1970s David Woodward came to Suffolk and moved into Groton Hall – a Centre for Rural Ministry. Mervyn Wilson was at the time a Rector in Bermondsey but saw an item about Groton and made contact. In 1978 Mervyn had moved to Bulwick in Northamptonshire, while the year before Tony Hodgson had moved to the Giddings in the Huntingdon area. In 1981 Groton Hall burnt down with the result that instead of a 'Centre' the threesome started to develop an 'Association'. Then when, soon after, Tony moved to become warden of the Dovedale Centre, John Whitehead started a group in nearby Staffordshire with Tony's encouragement. Initially Mervyn and Tony looked to the Urban Theology Unit for ideas on context, process and situation analysis. All 4 were present on 18 October 2006 along with 8 East Anglians who had joined over the ensuing 25 years – including veterans Hugh Searle, Richard Norburn and Richard Sledge

From the outset some senior figures were supportive, such as Anthony Russell then Director of the Arthur Rank Centre (who sent his apologies and greetings in Oct 2006) Others were suspicious – maybe because from the outset RTA crossed ecclesiastical boundaries and resisted a hierarchical organisation.

The RTA Occasional Papers which developed into the journal began in 1983 and have appeared continuously since. The first major conference was in 1987 at Scargill with Thomas Culinan. His material formed part of the RTA publication *The Rural Church Towards 2000* (1989) – published for a Hengrave Hall conference on the eve of the ACORA Report. Jim Mynors recalled that being his first contact with RTA and the warm welcome given his paper on Evangelicals & Rural Ministry. It was agreed RTA had always had an openness and avoided party spirit. Subsequently there was a significant conference at Salisbury on Holy Places and for some years the AGM & conference have moved around the country. No conference has been left in the hands of one person, and anyway conferences were a 'bonus' while RTA was a 'network' of individuals and groups rather than occasional events. There is no controlling centre.

The 1980s were a time of significant Rural Conferences and Reports such as those in Hereford, Lincoln and Chichester – as well as Tiller & ACORA. They also saw the Arthur Rank Centre making strides. The importance of the environmental was not then so recognised. But the death of Ian Calvert, who organised a Durham conference on Ecological issues, paved the way for CRUC - a spin off from RTA.

Seasonal Worship (from Staffordshire!) was another such spin off, as more recently the 'Rural Theology' Workshop in the Arthur Rank Centre Rural Ministry Training courses. Indeed many of the Rural Officers and leading figures in the umbrella Churches Rural Group are RTA members – including the 2 representatives of the Rural Churches in the UK at European Level in Prague recently.

Clearly the RTA still has much to contribute to the Rural Church Scene in the coming years. Now that it is held in high regard by senior church leaders as well as at the grass roots, the challenge is not to lose sight of its early strengths..

In 2007 the group will meet on May 12th with Sally Gaze nr Cambridge David Male (Fresh Expressions Adviser 07878099890 dm432@cam.ac.uk)

In July Richard Norburn is arranging a meeting on Rural Schools in Suffolk.

Rural Spirituality was also suggested as a topic

Devon: met to hear Dr John Wibberley about the work of RURCON in Africa (Rural and Urban Resources, Counselling, Outreach and Networking). John read agriculture at Reading and is a consultant in resource management.

The basis of the work of RURCON is not in financing projects, but enabling resources to be utilised in a positive and continuing way. RURCON is based in Nigeria but a small team of African Christian leaders work in many sub-Saharan countries including Malawi, Zambia, Ghana and many others including recently in Sudan.

They involve and encourage Christians to live the Gospel, to show a way of development among people living in poverty and near starvation. In some of the countries half the population may be under 15 years of age: six hours a day may be spent collecting water; up to 1/3 of income may be spent on fuel wood. Crops like wheat, maize, rice, bananas and sweet potatoes need to be fenced from uncontrolled goats, irrigation channels and stoves can be built and sons may be encouraged to grow food to pay for school fees.

Groups working together can bring hope and open the way of possibilities within farming, nutrition, health, theological education and other disciplines to learn that 'all the world is God's own field'.

Worcestershire - "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Migrant Workers and the Church" at Pershore College on 30th.Nov.06.

Some 20 heard John Paxton talk about the extent and characteristics of a recent report about migrant workers in the Vale of Evesham. Then John Crowe described the drop in centre for migrant workers run by churches in Leominster. A useful discussion followed.

An officially sponsored report had helped several organisations in the Vale of Evesham area realise the details surrounding a sudden and recent increase in the employment of migrant workers that had occurred in their area. Largely Poles, staying for a few months, some 2,400 at the time of the report, and day workers mostly from the Birmingham area, it plainly showed a big change in working patterns. Various needs arose in consequence. One had been largely addressed by the regulation of Gangmasters. But several remained. Among them was the expected increase in whole families moving for many months from Poland and other Eastern European countries. Accommodation, schools, language, health and local travel needs would arise, for those with or without families. Already, one school class of largely Polish Catholic children was established. Whilst some locals had been displaced, it seemed many had other work. The attraction to migrant workers of wages well above that of their homeland was obvious, despite them being near the minimum by British standards. Employment Agencies in Eastern Europe remained un-regulated, so exploitation and disappointment happened among some migrant workers using an agency to find work. The report had highlighted several matters to do with health, language teaching and the need for Polish speakers in particular to provide information and handle enquiries. There were only a few problems apparent concerning welfare. It was plain though that planning controls are not able to deal with the new situation, adequate provision of accommodation and large vehicles on small roads being two problems.

Members of churches in Leominster, Herefordshire had realised that an enormous number of people were walking some 4 miles into the town from the fields of a strawberry grower. About 2,500 migrant workers were in temporary accommodation. Some of them were walking to shop and to socialise. The same employer had an even larger number working in fields near to Hereford city. After a while relations were established both with some of the folk from abroad, and with the middle management of the firm employing them. A church building on the route into Leominster was opened as a drop in centre. Before that several workers, anxious to return to their homeland, but largely destitute, were helped by individuals out of their own pockets. Whilst the employer appeared to be operating within the law there are a significant number of unhappy and very disappointed people working for them. Some had paid large sums to agencies to get them to Britain to find their hopes dashed. There were

welfare matters that it was hard for the migrant to address. It was intriguing that whilst the Polish and French media had reported the matter accurately last summer the British media seemed more interested in the local dispute about polytunnels. Despite efforts by the media to uncover the contrary locals were supportive of the migrants in their midst.

Members in discussion shared their experiences, largely positive, in the Evesham area in contrast to that of Leominster. A Polish grocer was to be found, as were Polish clubs. A good many Polish cars are in evidence. Most migrants seemed to have abandoned their practice of religion. It was not clear what the local Catholic churches were doing. A local employer had visited a recruitment fair in Poland supported by major British supermarkets and others. He was astonished to learn that 60,000 people were expected to go through in one day. Many local lay people are concerned for the strangers in their midst. They should be helped to work with established agencies and fill in the gaps. There is a need for clear information to be given to locals so that they may be effective. A leaflet put out by Worcester diocese 12 months ago was commended but was being overtaken by events.

Next Meeting 3rd May 2007 11.15 at Pershore College

Welsh Marches Group met on Thursday, 5th October 2006 at 10.30 a.m.

1. Meetings in 2007: Tuesday, 6th March – RTA Stoneleigh Presentation.
4th July David. Hewlett: Local Ministry, The Lincolnshire Experience.
4th October – Canon John Crowe: Migrant Workers.

POLITICS, POLICIES AND RURAL PEOPLE

Speaker: The Revd Nick Read, OBE, ARAGS – Chaplain for Agriculture and Rural Life in the Diocese of Hereford; Director of The Rural Stress Information Network from 1996-2000. Amongst other activities he is involved with the Rural Affairs Forum for England & Wales

Nick stressed that in his role as Chaplain for Agriculture and Rural Life in the Diocese of Hereford, the many facets of rural life were most time consuming. In this role he has valuable, regular contacts with various stakeholders, e.g. in the next week he would be meeting Barry Gardiner, Minister for Landscape, Biodiversity & Rural Affairs.

1. Policy Drivers

1995 White Paper “*Rural England, a nation committed to a living countryside*”.

The aim here was for rural issues to be dealt with as an integrated part of government strategy, rather than a “tack-on” to different areas of policy. Not a lot happened, but it was the start of an integrated approach which eventually led to DEFRA.

White Paper, “*A fair deal for rural England*” committed the government to “**Rural Proofing**”, i.e. “*considering the likely impact of policy decisions on rural areas and, where necessary, adjusting the policy to take into account the particular needs of those who live in, work in, or enjoy the countryside*” e.g. transport, housing, recreation, etc. The Countryside Agency was given the task of monitoring rural proofing across government and it reported every year. Some government departments were better than others, e.g. the Department of Health was pretty bad at it. It established the principle of a “**Rural Affairs Forum**” within each English Region and a network that led to a “Rural Affairs Forum for England”, and it led to an integrated rural department, **The Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs** (DEFRA) in 2001.

Ancillary to this, the development of the Regional Agenda was given added impetus by the proposal of an elected regional assembly in the **White Paper “*Your Region, Your Choice, revitalising the English Regions*”**

2. Revision

The direction set out in the White Paper was modified over time, and in particular via:
the Haskins Review of Rural Delivery, "**Modernising Rural Delivery**", which looked at rural delivery funded by defra and implemented by the "DEFRA family";
a review of the targets set in the 2000 White Paper "*A fair deal for rural England*", e.g. access to Post Offices, etc. etc.; and
the response to the 2001 Foot & Mouth disease. There was a plethora of committees, one of which was Sir Donald Curry's "*Policy Commission on Sustainable Farming and Food*".
All three of these contributed to the government's **Rural Strategy 2004**, which promoted:
a greater role for **Regional Development Agencies** to support economic development in rural areas and to control social and economic programmes through the Rural Development Plan for England;
the abolition of the Countryside Agency, as recommended by Lord Haskin, and a smaller "rump" policy-orientated body called the **Commission for Rural Communities**, the Chairman of which would become the "Rural Advocate" (Stuart Burgess as from 1st October this year);
the development of **Natural England** (almost MAFF within defra – from the environmental strand of the formerly independent Countryside Agency and English Nature plus – out of defra – the Rural Development Service). Both of the latter had budgets slashed before they started.

3. Who's Who?

Nick went on to explain the implications of all this for the **West Midlands**

A fuller report of the meeting is on

<http://www.rural-theology.org.uk/localgroups/welshmarches/>

Cheshire

40 gathered to say farewell to Donald Marr on 8 December 2006 after 16 years. Donald then spoke about his vision for 20 year hence drawing on past experience. Copies of the notes of his talk are on <http://www.rural-theology.org.uk/localgroups/cheshire> or 'hard copies' may be requested from the Groups Secretary Jim Mynors 01223 891350

Sustainable Countryside – The Christian Responsibility

**A Conference
for all engaged in Christian ministry, mission,
and care for rural communities and countryside**

**The Hayes Conference Centre
Swanwick, Derbyshire
12 - 14 March 2008
Organised by
The Churches Rural Group**

copies of the brochure for CRG 2008 can be downloaded from www.churchesruralgroup.org.uk/conferences or are available from Sue Archer at the Arthur Rank Centre

RTA 24-hour conference

***Changing Countryside:
Changing Church***

24-hour conference
November 23 & 24
St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden

The next CERN conference will be focussing on change as experienced across Europe, and the theology of change. In part-preparation, and because of its importance to our own situation, we will be looking at the impact not only of the changing priorities for the countryside as set out by the government, but also at the changing priorities for the church as set out by the mission-shaped/fresh expressions agenda on the one hand, and the constraints of a still-encroaching secularism on the other, all (of course) underpinned by theological reflection.

More details will be available with the next mailing.

St Deiniol's, which will just have been refurbished, has good road and rail connections to all parts!

Can anyone help?

Jim Mynors would be glad to train and equip any volunteer willing to help with the RTA Website. The main task is to upload some 30 items a year – they virtually all come ready written (e.g. journal articles)! If you think this is a way in which you are able to contribute to RTA's communication work, please contact Jim:

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