

RTA Newsletter

February 2005



*From the
Chairman*



Rural Theology Association

AGM held in Yorkshire

The Annual General meeting of the Rural Theology Association was held in Yorkshire on Saturday, November 27th, 2004. The venue was Bay Tree Farm, Aldfield, near Fountains Abbey.

The day began with a talk by the Rt Revd James Bell, suffragan Bishop of Knaresborough in the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds. He presented trends which provided us with a challenge about the future of the church.

Peter Lawrence then led a short discussion on the future of the Groups within the RTA. For many, the groups provide an important contact point and the wide variety of topics they cover is proof that they provide challenging and interesting meetings. Jim Mynors has taken over from Peter Lawrence as Groups Liaison Officer. Thanks are due to Peter for doing this job for many years.

Two members of the Executive Committee, Sallie Bassham and Graham Elston, have retired and we thank them for the work and dedication they have shown. We welcome Richard Jones from the Salvation Army as a new member of the Executive.

RTA Conference and AGM
For God and Country
25-26 November 2005
Bishop Woodford House, Ely
Speakers: Anthony Russell, Bishop of Ely,
Geoff Dodgson, Graham Thompson
Group Discussions. Book Now!

IRCA News

The International Rural Church Association (IRCA) will hold its next conference in South Korea on June 19-23rd, 2006. The theme will be "Community Development" and about 100 people are expected to attend.

IRCA is a network of rural Christians from around the world who seek to support one another in their mission of connecting the gospel and rural life in their own context. The last conference was held in India in 2002.

The association is managed by a committee with representatives from several countries. Michael Cruchley, known to many RTA members, has recently completed a term as Secretary. The current chairperson is Robyn McPhail from New Zealand.

Canon Andrew Bowden is the link person in the UK. If anyone is interested in attending the conference or receiving IRCA's Prayer/Information bulletin, contact Andrew. His details are: The Rectory, Coates, Cirencester, GL7 6NR.
Tel: 01285 770235, e-mail:
bowdencoates@care4free.net

RTA website:
**[www.rural-
theology.org.uk](http://www.rural-theology.org.uk)**

Cope's Comments

'Presence' - not many months after the publication of the Methodist workbook for rural churches, and that one word is being used as something which everyone involved in the rural church must know about, and quite right too. And somewhere lurking on the contents page is perhaps what should have been the subtitle of the whole work, 'Promoting and Sustaining an Effective Christian Presence'. We are encouraged to be salt and light. We are encouraged to go and work for the kingdom. We are encouraged to do mission by doing Christianity. If you haven't read the workbook yet, or taken part in at least one study, then go and order a copy immediately! However, there is still the question of the bridge to build between the practice and the perception - and that's on our side of the fence.

Those of you who read *Country Way* will have run across my cautionary tale which showed how the people of my village had rallied round to help the carless once our Post Office had closed, without needing any prompting or structuring. Some of those who are helping are near-atheists, but still good neighbours; others are regular, worshipping Christians.

So how do we demonstrate that our offering of service is done because of our Christian faith, when at exactly the same time others offer service for totally different reasons? And if we say, 'I am taking you for your pension because I believe in Christ,' doesn't that say to the person we are taking that their own worth and friendship isn't a good enough reason of itself? After all, the near-atheist simply says 'I am taking you for your pension because you are my friend.'

Theologically, we might want to say, 'You are my friend because, as a follower of Jesus, I am trying to love everyone.' Practically, we have to say 'You are my friend because I like you.' Is that a watering-down of the gospel? I don't think so. But how can our love for our neighbour become a demonstration of the Christian presence in our village, if we are forced to use the same language as our near-atheist colleagues-in-caring?

The answer here probably lies in the direction of our mission. It is my contention that, when we are helping our neighbour, our mission is not to the neighbour we are helping. Rather, it is to the rest of the watching village (and the rest

of the village is usually watching only too closely!). When our neighbour sees our help, they will think no more than 'What a good friend.' But when the rest of the village sees the known Christians helping everyone, regardless of how loveable they may or may not be, that is when suddenly the Christian presence becomes known and can become recognised, and can make a difference and can draw others to the faith.

In short, then, it is absolutely essential that we are open and welcoming to everyone without exception, that we are prepared to serve everyone without exception, that we strive to love everyone without exception - and then the presence that we have in each of our villages can truly be the leaven in the lump, or the light of Christ, or whichever of Jesus's metaphors you might choose. So although evangelism through friendship might well be the most common way of bringing people to Christ, it is still the case that the church must have a mission to the entire community. Does your church's programme bear that out?

Stephen Cope
RTA Secretary
Vicar of Rudston with Boynton, Carnaby and Kilham and
Priest-in-charge of Burton Fleming with Fordon, Grindale and Wold Newton
Bishop of Hull's Adviser on Rural Affairs

Around the Groups

The new Groups Liaison Officer is Revd Jim Mynors. He can be contacted at: The Vicarage, 35 Church Lane, Little Abington, Cambridge CB1 6BQ, Tel 01233 891350, e-mail: groups@rural-theology.org.uk

Cheshire held a Rural Ministry Day in November, 2004. 38 people came to Lostock Gralam and heard **Jill Hopkinson**, the new Rural Officer for the Church of England, give food for thought about today's rural church. Jill focused her talk on "Social Capitalism", used to describe the wide variety of benefits, norms, and networks that facilitate collective action. It is to do with relationships; different groups working together to make a difference - both locally and further afield.

Like much else in the Church, social capitalism has three prongs: **Bonding**: ties and cohesion within one group (e.g. local congregation), **Bridging**: being inclusive; looking outwards to other community groups and **Linking**: networks between different groups, different communities - local, national and international. All three prongs provide opportunities for mission as the Church is a crucial stake holder in the wider community and is excellent at building social capitalism, e.g. most volunteers come from a faith background. The rural church should be more up front in terms of its contribution!

Derek Seber from Thornton Hough informed us about the latest edition of Liverpool's Walk of Faith - what Churches Together are doing for tourism. "Seeing is Believing" is an exhibition of religious art at the Tate in Liverpool for 6 months. Copies of a report, "The Economic Viability of the Village" the result of research done in Derek's parish, are available from him. His details are: Tel: 0151 3363429, e-mail: derek@morganseber.freeserve.co.uk
Next meeting: Wednesday 25 May 2005 - "**Mission Shaped Church - the Rural Version**". Canon Mark Rylands, Diocesan Missioner in the Anglican Diocese of Exeter, and formerly Vicar of Acton, Church Minshull, Wettenhall and Worleston in this Diocese, unpacks for us the new report in a rurally user friendly way. Mark knows mission, knows rural and knows us!

Welsh Marches met in October 2004.

The title for Revd Rosalind Brown's talk was "Creation, Recreation and Sustainable Living in God's World". Her view was that our relationship with the land is our relationship with God

- ? Most people think of "creation" as 14,000,000,000 plus years ago. So where does the cross of Christ have relevance?
 - ? The smallness of the earth in the whole cosmos. What effect can the Cross of Christ have on that scale?
 - ? Connection between humus and humanity is all part of creation
 - ? How is the Garden of Eden going to be redeemed?
 - ? Children's hymns, including those about the wonders of creation are written by adults. Some of them are hardly credible, yet children sing them because they have to, despite the awareness children have of their connected-ness with creation.
 - ? Covetousness is the first sin. In the age of advertising and peer-group pressure it masquerades as "choice".
 - ? Humanity should work with nature, not against it.
 - ? The perceived urban/rural divide must not militate against raising awareness of creation. All need to know about our inter-connectedness. In some cases that is more easy for country dwellers.
- These and many other points arose as a result of an expose of biblical signposts by Rosalind Brown, Vice Principal of the OLM scheme in the Salisbury Diocese and staff member of the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme.
- Next meetings: (both in Ludlow)
8 March 2005: **Seasonal Worship** (second series) & **What is CRES?** With John Whitehead
6 July 2005 with the **Bishop of Hereford**

Lincoln & Notts met at Brookenby, Lincolnshire for the first meeting of the re-formed group, on October 12th, 2004. Ten people attended. The group has been in abeyance since 1998. "**Doing Rural Theology**" was the title. Under the headings of Context, Rural Church and Rural Theology. The group, led by Canon Mike West, Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral, reflected upon local issues in the light of theology. First, get the facts as correct as possible. Then consider them in a broad context before coming to conclusions based upon good principles. A number of those present were very local, but they are in turn affected by events in the region. For them issues on church oversight and young people were prominent. One of the most far-reaching is the effect upon prices and living standards brought about by the development of the new University of Lincoln. It may be 30 miles away but the effect is noticeable. More immediate is the care of people in the light of the Gospel, especially the young and those on the fringe of faith.

The group also considered aspects of life in Nottinghamshire. Social changes affect the way the churches can respond to need. It is not always easy to discern which are more important and which are less, but a critical analysis can make for a much more effective response rather than "muddle along".

Next meeting: March 3rd : **Food & Community** with Alan Robson in Lincoln

Oxon and Cotswolds next meets on 28 April 2005 to discuss the Methodist workbook, "Presence".

East Anglia meetings for 2005:

March 17th : **Church Buildings** at Pakenham parish church – speaker Rev Tony Redman - a partner in a firm of architects who look after churches of several denominations spread over the Eastern Counties. He was lately vice-chairman of the Council for the Care of Churches, a member of St Albans Diocesan Advisory Committee and the Church and Community Trust millennium design panel, and is currently a member of the Baptist Union Listed Buildings Advisory Committee and Westminster Abbey FAC.

June 23rd: **Climate change** - constantly in our international news but with a special significance

for those near the East Anglian Coast. Even further inland (e.g. near Cambridge) there has been serious flooding in recent times. **Dr Laurie Boorman** is a professional ecologist with a special interest in coastal regions worldwide. He is also a long-established Reader. Since we have secured a room at the suitably situated Burlington Hotel on the Great Yarmouth seafront, there will be a modest charge of £6 for the day to cover Sandwiches, coffee etc. please book in advance

Devon and Wilts & Dorset both had talks by Martyn Goss on **Climate Change**. He feels that there are four particular principles which underpin a Christian approach to God's creation:

The Creation Covenant

The first principle is the covenant that God made with Noah and the whole creation. This was not just with human beings but with all creatures. The root of the Hebrew word for covenant (berith) carries a sense of binding. Creation is bound to the invisible God and to itself in a web of complex interrelationships across the living planet. Sever one part and every other part is affected. Sever enough parts and the whole web falls apart.

The Sacrament of Creation

The second is that of the sacredness of creation. Creation is sustained and given life continually by the Holy Spirit. It is the expression of God. It is not to be mistaken for God, but no part of it is without God's sacred presence. There is no 'away' where we can throw things. All is part of the divine plan!

Priests of Creation

The human species is often characterised as a rogue species which having gained the upper hand is now hell-bent on destroying the universe. In contrast, the third Lambeth principle calls humans to be the priests of creation. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, the creation story is symbolically echoed in the building of the temple, with its holy of holies, beyond space and time, its outer part, symbolising the phenomenal creation, and its high priest, who is exemplified in Adam. Jesus, as the new Adam, re-enters creation, mending the broken bonds of the covenant and restoring the fertility of the earth.

The Sabbath feast of 'enoughness'

In the roaring voracity of desire that can so consume our waking hours and even our sleep in dreams, our religion calls us to stop. Stop

completely, properly, for a period of time, not just to pause for breath before carrying on consuming, but to take a deep dive into God's peace. In the Genesis description of the creation, the crown of all creation is not humanity, created on the sixth day, but the Sabbath, in which God himself took a rest on the seventh day. Such a rest is to be offered not only to humans but to all creation. Leaving land fallow, forgiving debts and returning goods are all part of the 'jubilee' call to stop for a while and be still.

Devon Group will meet on 23 June when they visit an **organic farm near Totnes**.

Wilts & Dorset Group will meet on May 4th on with Renewable energy and Wind Farms as the topic and on October 5th on the subject of Fair Trade. Both meetings are at Sedgemoor Village Hall.

West Sussex Group met on October 21st at Horsham. **Rosemary Cattell** led the meeting in a general discussion about '**Future Patterns of Ministry**'. The major focus was on the variety of ways in which Church of England dioceses are developing new strategies for mission and ministry. Noting that the rise in, and demands of, multi-parish ministry has stimulated 'every-member' or 'collaborative' ministry, the group were nevertheless aware that this may be inhibited where clergy have difficulty encouraging and enabling the ministry of others, or indeed where a congregation is overly dependent on the clergy.

There was an interest in the collegiate minster system and Rosemary informed the group of an example from the Sandwich Deanery of the Diocese of Canterbury, where four 'minster clusters' became operational during 2004. The intention is for a larger urban church to serve as a minster, encouraging and resourcing any church-plants, cell groups and smaller rural parishes in its cluster. The progress of these minster clusters is due for assessment early in 2005.

Other patterns briefly considered were 'Mission and Ministry Areas' and 'Mission Communities' (see Diocese of Derby and Diocese of Exeter web sites). Here, parishes are encouraged to form collaborative partnerships with neighbouring parishes and other ecumenical partners with which they already connect

socially. The meeting closed with lunch at the Queen's Head in Barns Green.

Next meeting: April 12th at Boxgrove. Dr Edward Echlin, Roman Catholic theologian, author and environmentalist will speak on "**Climate, Soil and the Jesus Lifestyle Today**", followed by lunch at The George at Earham.

Plans are in hand to revive the **Northants** group and hopefully to restart one in the **North East** and form a new group in **Hampshire**. Contact Jim Mynors for details.

Contact details for groups:

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New Co-Director sought

Christian Rural Concern (CRuC) are seeking a new co-director for the Certificate in Rural and Environmental Studies (CRES). CRES is a two-year course covering the whole range of rural and environmental issues from a Christian point of view and in some depth of approximately undergraduate standard.

ROLE SUMMARY:

The co-director's role is oversight of student studies, provision of local tutoring, supply and development of course material, and collaboration with colleagues and sponsoring bodies. The co-director would have an involved interest in rural matters and some academic background.

For more information, contact The Revd Peter Bowles, 3 Black Horse Yard, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, NR23 1BN, Tel: 01328 711119, e-mail: bowlesp@fish.co.uk

Research Studentships

The Welsh National Centre for Religious Education in Bangor has been awarded two research studentships. The first studentship is a partnership between the university and the cathedral of St Davids, the second studentship is a partnership between the university and the cathedral of Bangor.

Bangor and St Davids are cathedrals which are placed in essentially rural locations and represent an important facility for the community. The aim of both research projects is to assess the role the cathedrals currently play within their local communities and to suggest ways in which this role can be expanded for the benefit of the community and the cathedral.

Mr Emyr Williams is undertaking the Bangor Cathedral Project and The Revd Jennie Annis is undertaking the St Davids Cathedral Project. Both researchers would be interested in learning about the different ways in which cathedrals and churches around the country engage in community life, from people involved in mission, and from those who have seen 'good practice'.

If you would like to find out more about these projects and have some insights to offer please contact Mr Emyr Williams telephone 01248 382761 e-mail rsp019@bangor.ac.uk

ARC training courses:

Multi-parish Benefice workshop: 11-12 October, 2005 and 24-25 January, 2006

Rural Ministry Induction course: 10-12 May, and 29 November – 1 December, 2005

Details: Tel 024 7685 3060 or e-mail info@arthurrankcentre.org.uk