

Devon Churches Rural Forum Meeting Notes 2nd November 2021

10 am to 12 noon – At Cheriton Bishop YFC Rural Hub and by Zoom

1 Archdeacon Douglas opened the meeting with prayer.

2 **Welcome and introductions**

Present in person were: Douglas Dettmer (Archdeacon of Totnes in the chair), Penny Body (Secretary), Stuart Wilson (Market Chaplain), Dave Watson (Methodist Lay Minister), Danny Semorad (Farmer, Church Warden, Devon Historic Churches Trust), Marisa Cockfield (Team Vicar, Police Chaplain, Exeter Diocese Mental Health Round Table), Sylvia West (Deanery Synod Secretary and DFWI), Jane Skinner (Team Rector), Lydia Perris (Social Justice and Environment Officer Diocese of Exeter), Elizabeth Burke (Team Rector), Verena Breed (Archdeacon of Barnstaple).

Present by zoom were: Mark Betson (National Rural Officer C of E), Howard Wilson (Regional Learning and Development Coordinator (South West) - The Methodist Church), John Wibberley (Agronomist and Chair Devon FCN), Sam Upham (Growing the Rural Church Project), Richard Yarwood (Professor of Human Geography, University of Plymouth).

The Chair especially welcomed Archdeacon Verena Breed, who is our new Archdeacon of Barnstaple and will become chair of the DCRF from our next meeting and Lydia Perris, the new Social Justice and Environment Officer for the Diocese of Exeter to their first meeting, and also Sam Upham attending for the first time representing the Growing the Rural Church project.

3 **Apologies** were received from Ruth Frampton, Jane Frost, David Ursell, Mike Clark, Richard Taylor, Jane Hayes, John Corrie, Sarah Cracknell, Colin Smallacombe, Andy Jerrard, Janet May, Martin Beck.

4 [Notes from the last meeting](#) on 14th July were agreed.

5 **Matters and actions arising from the last meeting** (not covered elsewhere on the agenda).

- The only item is to keep “on the agenda” the action to find a way to collect together case studies relating to the various social issues faced in our rural communities and feed these back to those in a position to influence policy in these areas. Penny and Lydia have been discussing this, but it requires more thought, and may need to fit within a wider project.

6 Main Item – Review and Look Forward for the DCRF

Penny went through some of the history and work of the Devon Churches Rural Forum over the past five years. You can access both the summary presentation and fuller written paper [here](#).

We had a very rich discussion, with significant fleshing out of our work strands and consideration of the way we work. Enthusiasm for the work of the DCRF was clear, as was the willingness of those present to become more involved in taking our work forward which was very encouraging for all. The meeting today opened up the discussion and we now need to consolidate.

We agreed to take away the points raised and form them into a proposal for discussion and agreement on the way forward at our next meeting. **Action: Verena and Penny will work on this between the meetings.**

The full discussion is recorded as Appendix A, but these are the main points:

- **On our Work Strands (see background paper for the current list):**
 - There was significant interest in the whole rural social issues, with a particular emphasis on rural housing, and how we both respond to these, and influence policy, as the church.
 - We would like to do more to support training for rural ministry and help to convey the enthusiasm we all feel. This may be combined with events focused on social issues – see above.
 - We would like to add a new work strand of “Worship and Spirituality” and this may also link into social issues as we work on theological reflection.
 - More emphasis on the environmental strand may enable the DCRF to support church who may be struggling with this.
 - No-one thought any of our current work strands should be taken off the list!

- **On working with others and communications**
 - It would be helpful to better co-ordinate the rural work of the different groups within the diocese of Exeter and with other churches and organisations to avoid duplication and offer a coherent programme of support and resources for our rural areas.
 - Rural ministers and others do not always know of the existence and work of the DCRF or how to join in meetings or events – we need to address this.
 - It would be good to connect more with people from universities and other organisations to develop understanding and solutions to rural issues.

- **On how we work**

- There was considerable enthusiasm for a system of “Champions” and “Task Groups” to take work forward and be a focus for information and communication. This would help us in taking our meeting discussions forward into action. Various people expressed their willingness to take on some of these roles and an action point is to find out which other DCRF members would like to become more involved in particular interest areas. **Action: Penny/Verena**
- Some form of Steering Group would help co-ordinate and direct the work of the DCRF. Before Covid we had been moving towards this. Further thought will be given to this and a proposal brought to the next meeting.
- It was agreed that meeting 3 times a year feels right, but that the meetings could be extended to incorporate time for some formal break out groups/networking and also lunch for those who may like to continue with less formal discussions.
- We could consider more formal aims and objectives for our work – the current aims are available on our website homepage. We also need to be flexible to take up ideas that emerge from networking and discussion.

7 **Farming**

No written update has been produced for this meeting because the full harvest briefing has only recently been issued. This briefing had been appreciated and used quite widely for harvest festivals – it was good to see the good news about the harvest this year.

Douglas thanked Danny and Jane Semorad for their hospitality and opening their farm for what was a very good day at our farm visit on August 4th. Danny also thanked David Ursell and John Wibberley for contributing greatly to the farming discussions on the day and Douglas for leading the worship at the end of the day. John Wibberley has put together some photo albums which will be put on our website.

We agreed that Penny and Danny will work together to begin organising a farm visit for the first half of 2022.

8 **Feedback from meetings attended**

Jane, Elizabeth, Penny and Douglas had attended various sessions of the Rural Services Network annual conference. There are notes available on the RSN website for all sessions which can be accessed via this link [The National Rural Conference 2021 - Conference Learning Outcomes and Presentations - Rural Services Network \(rsnonline.org.uk\)](https://rsnonline.org.uk)

Douglas and Penny had attended the Richard Benyon (Minister for Rural Affairs and

Bio-security) audience which whilst interesting was rather political and showed the difficulties of engaging in this type of forum – though both had questions addressed.

Penny, Elizabeth and Jane attended the rural economy session. Clearly there are many barriers to starting and running a business in rural areas and this discussion was really interesting and useful. However, in places it felt as though insufficient account of the rural culture being was being taken into account. Others present concurred.

Elizabeth and Jane had attended the youth session – where topics such as loneliness, lack of transport, county lines and other vulnerabilities were discussed. Elizabeth was really encouraged that the discussion was not focused only on funding and needing money but more about “this is how things are and how can we make the best use of what we have”. Jane added that hearing directly from a young councillor was really helpful – this is another area the church can get involved in – for example encouraging other young people to get involved with their parish councils.

Jane also suggested the church could work with schools on enterprise days – for example asking local farmers to speak to children in schools about the technicalities of farming and the need for stem subjects. She also asked how we could come alongside our schools and encourage them. Douglas, as chair of the diocesan Board of Education, was interested in helping students make connections between life aspirations and what they need to achieve at school. He also said Governors are so important in schools and we can really encourage our members to explore this ministry.

Elizabeth noted that younger people were standing for the council in Holsworthy and she is a member of the Community Forum who is engaging with young people in the town. She feels there is a real shift towards hearing the voice of the young. Douglas suggested we could also encourage our young people to join PCCs, not least as good experience to then become a parish councillor.

Separately Elizabeth asked if we have any female farmers on the DCRF as some primary schools are having days to encourage girls into farming. Jo Jones was suggested. **Action: Penny will send Elizabeth Jo’s details.**

9 Notices and Events

RSN AGM on 15th November – information already circulated.

10 AOB

John has written a one side of A4 information sheet about cattle and climate (which can be accessed on our website [here](#)) as he is concerned by the frequent misinformation on cattle which is dispensed and repeated by many commentators.

Douglas thanked Penny for her preparation for the main item today. Verena also thanked Douglas very much for chairing the DCRF in the interim.

11 Dates and themes of next meetings:

February 1st, July 28th, November 29th. Times and venues to be confirmed.

12 Closing Prayer led by Verena

Appendix A

Full Discussion of Main Agenda Item – The DCRF Going Forward

Are our Work strands still appropriate?

- Mark asked whether we should have a separate strand relating to rural housing as this is such a major issue in the rural areas at present.
- John suggested looking at national and international issues and contextualising them for our life here in Devon.
- Jane felt we need to be more pro-active in our influencing of county and regional decision making regarding rural social policy as the church is a huge repository of knowledge in many areas. Urban areas, with larger numbers, will always find it easier to influence their politicians. We need to find newer ways to get the rural issues across.
- Marisa commented about the mismatch between what is in the media and the challenges faced by farmers. The harvest report generated many conversations about how we can make sure that the farming arguments can be heard properly at a time when there is considerable misinformation. She wondered whether we could consider developing a paper discussing the environmental challenge and the process of producing food – how we can combine this discussion and take it into a wider debate.
- Dave spoke about the changing nature of our rural communities with the new people moving in, some with little knowledge of farming issues, low wages, affordable housing and the realities of rural life in general.
- Under farming support Stuart noted the good work being done by the NFU in opening farms and encouraging people from outside to visit. One of our roles can be to encourage people to visit – the power of invitation can work very well.

- Elizabeth would like to see these social issues connected to training of ordinands. Perhaps we can work through Mark in being connected to all the colleagues and training courses in the country to make rural training for ministry more available. Arthur Rank Centre of course also offers training for rural ministry which we could link more people into. Douglas stressed the excitement and need to communicate the enthusiasm for rural ministry we all share.
- Sylvia spoke about the “resolution” system of the WI where each year resolutions are proposed by the national body which are then voted on by members. The resolution(s) that goes through then becomes a chosen campaign for the year and beyond.
- Douglas said that the church tends to work in the background politically through the national rural affairs group and the national rural officer working with government committees and in the House of Lords and as part of organisations such as the Rural Coalition.
- Penny would like to add a Rural Worship/Spirituality strand to our work – which would fit with the interest in the Rural Worship Workshop we ran in 2019. Rural and social issues can also link into this area as one of the great gifts of the church is prayer – and we can also do some theological reflection on issues such as affordable homes. Douglas commented that such an event could be opened up to ordinands and also linked in with training.
- Elizabeth thinks the environmental strand could be strengthened so that those churches who may be struggling with this agenda could be helped and supported by the DCRF.
- Douglas summarised that interestingly we are focusing significantly on the “monitoring and responding to social issues” work strand and said the discussion had been very helpful in fleshing out our hopes for our work. He asked if anything should come off our current list. The answer was no!

Communications and Co-ordination with other bodies

- We considered how we link into the work of other organisations – both church based and secular – in Devon. Verena feels that there are areas of rural work within the Diocese of Exeter and beyond which are not linked as well as they could be. Bringing these to work together more coherently could help avoid any duplication and make the overall offering stronger with an overarching rural umbrella.
- Verena also felt that lack of a rural officer is a significant gap. Training has been mentioned but resourcing and supporting ministers in rural ministry could be enhanced. In Chester diocese a group of rural clergy worked together to support ministers – perhaps something like this could be looked at in Devon? Perhaps linked into the work of the DCRF? How would this link with existing support from Philip Sourbut’s team? We could also look at how we

work together more closely with Growing the Rural Church.

- The Bright Field initiative is not currently represented on the DCRF – we are waiting for a new representative after Simon Franklin retired.
- Sam said that Sarah Cracknell has been discussing with Lydia how their two areas of work can support each other. GtRCh is there to resource and support others.
- Lydia said that rural issues need solutions developed by people from many areas working together. Rural practitioners bringing particular rural expertise, working with people in wider organisations such as universities and county wide organisations could help develop solutions on a Devon wide basis.
- Elizabeth said she stumbled across the DCRF. DCRF should be represented on induction days. How is the group represented in the diocese? How do people know about it? This is part of the communication issue.
- Communications – Roots and Shoots – not easy always to get things in. Douglas and Verena will see if this can help with this. Perhaps Roots and Shoots could also be used to invite people to meetings of the DCRF? With zoom this is easy. However, Marisa also said that with the Mental Health Round Table – they put all sorts of information about courses etc. – but people still weren't aware of them. In any institution communications are the issue!!!!
- Howard will consider how he can use his newsletter to communicate and share our work within the Methodist network.

How we work

- Jane thought it may be a good idea to have champions for different areas of our work. Such people could help crystallise ideas from meetings, be a reference point for others and help make things happen. Douglas said one significant weakness in our working is that we are very dependent on the secretary. Sharing out the championing of the different areas would help to redress this. Task groups, which were our preferred way of working before Covid, both for projects and events would work well alongside Champions and help to promote collegiate and collaborative working.
- Douglas asked – do we feel this is the right time for people to do a bit more portfolio holding? Many volunteered.
 - Training: Elizabeth said would be prepared to take an active role in exploring training possibilities with the help of others' expertise. Stuart offered to help from

the agricultural side. Richard has been involved in training for rural vicars and would be very happy to do this again.

- Research: Douglas affirmed that we are very blessed with calibre and quantity of academic institutions. Richard's work involves both teaching and research and already two research projects have come from the work of the DECF - one on dementia with FCN and now another with Martin Beck on rural crime. He said if there were areas of work relating to rural geography, sustainability we could link in with him to see how they may be taken further from a research point of view. Douglas commented that research projects are another excellent way to bring issues into the wider public arena and influence policy and said it was very helpful to have this possibility. Lydia suggested her and Richard linking also with researchers at Exeter University where she also studied human geography.
 - Youth and Social Issues: Jane would be keen to take a more active role with respect to rural youth issues – and maybe wider social issues.
 - Douglas thanked all those who had offered and said that while we probably won't fill all positions at this stage it is a good start. **Action: Verena, Douglas, Penny to circulate the forum members to find out more about people's interests and whether they would feel able to take on some more active roles championing our various work strands.**
- Lydia felt that some tighter goals and aims might be helpful. It would help others to communicate with us if these were clearly available for people.
 - A Steering group, which was at an early stage of development before Covid, would help to keep the overall work of the Forum coherent and balanced. This would have a person representing each of our work areas.
 - Douglas said that our meetings use precious time but are really important and give us the space and opportunity to re-focus on our rural themes. We agreed that meeting around three times per year is good – we generally meet February, July and November.
 - How would we like to use the time – the balance? Focus on a major issue or updates on all areas? In general people felt it was good to have a theme to focus on, but to ask others to give a written update for meetings.
 - Elizabeth said she would value time for break out groups so we can talk with people in a more in depth about a particular subject. Several others concurred and agreed that meetings would need to be longer to accommodate this. Douglas suggested perhaps extending from 10am to 1 pm to give time for some break out groups, and also if anyone wanted to share a pub lunch afterwards informal discussion could continue.

- Douglas asked Mark, as national C of E rural officer, what he would find helpful. Mark? Key things included a single point of communication to let Mark know when there is an issue that needs addressing – and also to pass on examples of good practice. Mark will try and make one meeting a year in person – and more if possible – but otherwise will join us via zoom. Douglas thanked Mark very much for this.

Douglas thanked everyone for a very rich discussion.