



Appendix A: Theological Frameworks

Each time the Consultation has met we have read the bible together and engaged with it with a rural lens and set everything within prayer. This has had significant influence on our discussion and has kept our deliberations, even when at their most functional, within a clear sense of being 'shaped by God'. The following describes some of our key theological underpinnings.

1. Jesus was a rural person. The synoptic gospel writers, often shaped by the norms of ancient biography, give particular weight to his birth and his death in a city. However, his formative years in Nazareth were in a small town near to small scale fishing and agrarian communities. His parables most clearly show his use of rural and farming imagery e.g. The Sower, Matthew 13:1-23.

Jesus would have known something of the dynamics of rural people. For example, he would have felt much more connected to the seasons, to the rhythms of day and night, and to the weather. We can assume too that he would have heard the rural voices which suggested that they were less well considered than those in the bigger places.

Visitors to the Holy Land today often find it easier to connect with the Jesus of their faith at the lake and on the hillsides of Galilee than in the bustle of Jerusalem or Bethlehem. Yet the truth is that Jesus was a rural person who also operated well in the city. We have recognised that reading the bible explicitly through rural eyes is revealing and is a counter-balance to many theological assumptions which have been shaped in the towns and cities which have housed the places of theological scholarship.

2. Places and landscapes carry significance and memory. Wells have great theological resonance. Many places grow up around the availability of water. In both New and Old Testaments, they are the locations for many encounters and discourses between people which also often reveal the divine. For example, Revelation 7:17 looks to the provision of 'springs of water' in the fullness of God's kingdom or Isaac meets Rebecca at a well (Genesis 29) and having formed that partnership, they would give birth to Jacob and Esau.

In a middle-eastern culture with relatively little rain, wells that connected with springs provided security for the community and storage for the rain water which fell. This meant they also became locations of conflict as resources were contested when scarce e.g. Genesis 21: 25-30.

So communities today may share such deep originating stories which may still have a lot of implicit and mostly unarticulated significance. The biblical writers often make connections between an older foundational story and the story of Jesus. For example, Jacob's well in Shechem is the background to the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in John 4. The quest for real physical water is then reframed to a quest for living waters and spiritual satisfaction. We were drawn to God's provision for his people, the competition that comes from scarcity and the deep contours which make up the underlying sense of place.

3. Green Pastures speaks of lush and fertile provision. The Psalms are shaped by both rural and urban motifs. Many English people have equated this image from Psalm 23 with lush English pasture. However, within the Middle Eastern context, such pasture was more sporadic and patchy with for example, the desert suddenly blooming (e.g.: Isaiah 35:2).

So animals had to be moved to the places which seasonally became green. This image was then applied to God's people e.g. Jeremiah 23:3. Some land was highly valued because of pasture and was often apportioned as a sign of God's providence e.g. Joshua 2. This then led to the image of pasture even being applied to a city such as Jerusalem (Isaiah 33:20) as a description of God's generosity.



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Green pastures therefore spoke of the steadfastness of God alongside the creation of new opportunity which emerges as surprise and emerges often in places which may be more typically barren. This begged us to look hard, to be open and surprised.

4. We also engaged with the processes of change; the need to address the past, face the challenges of the present and to re-imagine a future for rural mission and ministry. We found resources in the biblical tradition of lament articulated most in the Psalms of Lament. These have both an individual character e.g. Psalm 22 and a communal character e.g. Psalm 44. They are honest and enable people to set their pain before God and through that to discover a new depth of trust in God for the future. This stands in contrast to complaint or moaning.

Walter Brueggeman recognises that the Psalms work well because there is a process of orientation, dis-orientation and new orientation embodied in their structure (see *Spirituality of the Psalms* 2002). In other ways we come before God, we pour out our hearts and through grace we are given hope to see our pains and disappointments in a new light.

We recognised the need to take this process of lament seriously as a necessary part of change. In some places this kind of change might be as significant as facing a kind of death. We explored that even in this case that it may be considered good if handled well and if set within the frame of Christ and his death and resurrection.

5. The New Testament uses many images to describe the church but prevalent is the organic imagery used by St Paul in describing the church as a body (1 Corinthians 12). This picture provides a vision of interconnection and interdependence. It is literally human scaled and it recognises that life and growth are natural phenomena we can expect also to see in the Body of Christ. These insights help underline the importance of the life of the diocese. This is how we have understood the local church.

Therefore whilst individual churches need plenty of connection and relational capital, the life of the diocese connecting all kinds of Christians in all kinds of contexts is not just an additional extra which is nice to have. Rather a sense of diocesan inter-dependence between groups or teams of churches and between the rural and the urban is of the essential nature of the church all nurtured and sent through the ministry of the Bishop.

Secondly, we noted that in many rural contexts there is a much greater sense of community connection and established relationships across the whole community than in other geographical contexts. This therefore also means that the boundaries around the edges of the Christian community are hard to pin down and narrowly define. Clearly some people are much more shaped by and committed to a Christian way of life than others. However, there is great fluidity around this. We note that human crisis such as illness or life changes often can become a stimulus to growth in faith.

The Pauline metaphor of the body values the whole whether small or large, spectacular or mundane. This organic approach sits well with the nature of the missional context of rural communities. Organic is not often used as a theological category but we have found it described the essential quality of the life of church rather than use it as a particular movement or typology of church. This is about people empowered by the breath and work of the Spirit.

6. The sociological character of rural communities is as complex as any other and is diverse especially as society changes. There is plenty of evidence of post-Christian and post-secular ideas being present in rural communities. At the same time an enduring sense of the Christianity being the default faith position as



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embodied by the village church and its establishment which often includes a church school. So many people will have little or no overt interest in Christianity yet they may help support the fabric of the village church. It would still be very unusual for a village funeral not to take place in the village church.

Incarnational theology which understands the world into which Jesus Christ comes (John 3:16) has always been a vital task in Christian mission. We recognised that many discourses of this nature about who and what the world may be have been shaped by urban identities which cannot be super-imposed onto the rural. The rural context is particular even if there are plenty generic experiences common to all contexts.

Any response to the challenges of evangelism or discipleship or even the functional organisation and governance of rural churches therefore must be shaped by local wisdom and an awareness of God's Spirit already being at work in the world which we are seeking to discern. Rural churches have usually been embedded in their communities as part of the sense of the Church of England being available in every place to the whole people of England. The way in which this has been expressed has changed century to century and will do so again.

However, we have been convinced that an incarnational approach which values people and their stories is a key route to the discernment of mission and ministry for the future. So this approach is untidy, particular, and less programmatic than some other approaches.