

# Introduction to Growing the Rural Church

## August 2020

'Hold fast to the head which is Christ, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God' (Colossians 2.19). Growth comes from God. It is not a purpose: it is an outcome of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Which is why nothing is more important for the life of the Church in our Diocese, whether we live in the city, in a seaside or market town, or in the depths of the country than for each of us to go deeper into God in prayer. Grace transforms us and releases our mission energy to reach out to others and invite them into the adventure of discipleship.

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown up a host of challenges but also new opportunities. It has forged new partnerships and forced the reluctant and the suspicious to work together in imaginative ways. People have rediscovered the local. Rural connectivity, admittedly patchy in some remote parts of the county, is permitting more people to work from home and invest in their village. All this bodes well for the health of the rural church and the communities we serve.

As we recover from the pandemic and inch our way forward, a key aim of *Growing the Rural Church* project will be to facilitate learning from one another about sustainability and growth. We are discovering new ways of being Church and of worshipping online. We are connecting with 'the fringe' in ways that our urban cousins have longed to do for years. Parishioners who for reasons of infirmity or disability have been unable to attend their church have felt re-included in the life of their worshipping community. These good things need to be built on, not squandered

in a casual return to former patterns of church life. As we re-open our church doors, we must not shut our virtual doors.

One of the fundamental things that we have re-learned is that Church is people, not buildings. That said, our buildings are important: 'a serious house on serious earth,' is how the poet Philip Larkin described his parish church. For centuries our network of churches have been at the heart of our rural communities. Their towers and spires speak of the changelessness of God. A significant percentage of the rural population still see their village church as their spiritual home and the natural venue for important moments in the lives of their families, be it a marriage, a christening, or the funeral of a devoted grandparent. As we look ahead, now is the time to review the use and viability of our buildings and, where need be, make courageous decisions. And this needs to be done on a mission community basis. The *Growing the Rural Church* team are available to help you have these conversations.

It is sometimes said that life is a journey. A better word from my perspective is pilgrimage. Our task is to draw all humanity into the life of God. As a fellow pilgrim, I invite you to journey with me, entrusting the past to God's mercy, the present to his grace, and the future to his providence.

With my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon