

Presence

Papers 1

Stories of how Christian congregations have made a difference in their rural communities

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If you would like to know more about any of these stories, contact John Howard at John_d_howard@hotmail.com

In 2004 the publication “Presence” described a vision for the future of the rural church

This is the first of a number of occasional papers reflecting how the rural church is developing today

Ringsash Circuit, Devon

Engaging with children and young people in rural communities

When I arrived in the Ringsash Circuit in 1999, I was amazed at the effectiveness of this group of rural chapels at reaching and keeping children and teenagers, with Junior Church and Youth Fellowship groups thriving. For example, I know of one village chapel with less than 50 members, yet its Sunday School is regularly attended by nearly 30 children. While it is not possible to pinpoint any 'formula for success', the following observations can be made.

First, while rural villages may not be as well resourced in other ways as towns and cities, the one thing they do have is *community*. It is difficult to be anonymous, and as such churches have a certain prominence, which they can either embrace or shy away from. Where it is embraced, strong links with village schools can be formed and close relationships among parents and families nurtured. I have noticed that when churches invite young people in these communities to something, they usually come.

Second, the power of churches working together, as circuits and ecumenically, is especially significant when it comes to rural youth work. Mid Devon is served by 'Connect' -- an interdenominational initiative with South West Youth Ministries, which places trainee Christian youth workers in local secondary schools for a period of up to three years. In school they build links with young people through giving lessons, support, leading clubs, assemblies and Christian Unions, while in the evenings they work in church youth clubs. Small chapels may not be able to afford full-time youth workers, but 'Connect' is a living example of what can be accomplished when churches resolve to work together for a common cause.

Last but not least, *willingness* should not be underestimated. Churches must genuinely *want* to engage with the younger generation if they are to stand any chance of doing so. Sadly, when Christians shrug their shoulders and say 'I'm too old to relate to young people', they are really referring to a lack of will rather than any lack of ability. Some of the most effective youth ministry I know of in mid-Devon is undertaken by older volunteers who simply want to show young people that they care. And that perhaps is the most significant way in which small churches can share the love of Jesus.

Revd Dr Russell Herbert, Minister in the Ringsash Circuit

Hope Cove Methodist Church

Hope Cove Methodist Chapel was extensively refurbished in 2005 and members felt it was important to make good use of the lovely old building. The chapel is situated in a picturesque former fishing village and many regular visitors and holidaymakers swelled the congregation.

A leaflet was produced outlining the chapel's history and distributed around the village, including the hotels. Bookmarks were placed in the chapel for visitors to take. Weekly coffee mornings were held through the summer at which music was provided by a member who has a lovely singing voice.

Instead of the usual Harvest Festival sale of produce, villagers were invited to a free buffet supper. The plan was to give away the produce and the supper as a gift of love to the community. More than 40 people filled the chapel to capacity. It was a very happy occasion and villagers said similar events, particularly in the winter, would be welcomed. Generous donations meant that more money went into church funds than in the past, even after half the proceeds had been given to charity.

Building on this success, members ran a free coach outing to Buckfast Abbey and made more new contacts. Fortunately one of the members is able to drive coaches and gave his services for the day for nothing. The church hopes to run similar trips in the future.

There are more plans in the pipeline, including a carol service, gospel choir evening, music night and prayer mornings. The chapel may also be used for day retreats and painting and prayer events.

Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

Mark 6:31 (NIV)

Worship services at the chapel just off the square, Inner Hope, Sundays 6 p.m.

We can promise you a warm welcome

For further details please telephone Rev John Kendall, Superintendent Minister

01548 852073

Or

Mrs Jane Hart, church steward, 01548 561809

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...

Romans 15:13 (NIV)

On Easter Sunday 2005 the chapel re-opened after an extensive three month refurbishment programme. This included work inside and out to keep out the damp, attention to the flooring which was sanded and varnished, complete redecoration and the provision of disabled toilet facilities and a kitchenette. The church was packed to capacity to celebrate the Easter message and also the new chapter in the life of the chapel.

Uploders Methodist Church, Bridport, Dorset

The Other Public House

Uploders Methodist Church is a Wesleyan single-cell Methodist Chapel situated 3 miles east of Bridport, in Dorset. Built in 1827 it is a Grade 2 listed building. There are nine members. Situated in a small rural village, the only two focal points are the pub and the church -- hence the name given to their recent fund-raising campaign: "*The Other Public House*"

The building, sadly, had become in urgent need of repair due to well-meant but inappropriate maintenance over a number of years. There had been severe damp penetration, windows needed replacing and had the work not been done as a matter of urgency the building would have had to close. This would have meant more than the loss of a place of worship, however, because despite still retaining its pews, the church was regularly used for arts and craft exhibitions by local artists, for concerts (it has superb acoustics) and for coffee mornings. Such events had become a regular part of community life and supported fund-raising not only for the church, but for other charitable organisations too. Access for the disabled issues had been dealt with in 2002 at a cost of £6,000.

When the decision was taken to seek grant aid for the restoration of the building, the members further resolved to make an application for additional funding to add on a unisex toilet for the disabled and also a tea-point. There was, at that time, no drainage and no running water. They also decided to replace pews with chairs and purchase some tables. Within 14 months the work had been completed and a little over £72,000 had been raised. The church was fortunate in having a very committed team of fundraisers and also someone who excelled in selling unwanted goods to benevolent locals!

Now, the church is able to make a contribution not only to the spiritual but also the physical well-being of those for whom it has pastoral care. With the assistance of the local district nurses, elderly folk are bussed in once a month for a social afternoon followed by tea and are able at the same time to get their blood pressure checked and discuss basic health problems. At the end of October 65 villagers came to get their winter flu injections and at the same time enjoy an afternoon cup of tea and now a new health and welfare forum, "Fit for Life" has been started. It is also hoped to set up a series of Expert Patients Self-Management courses to help people with long-term health conditions improve their quality of life; these last two initiatives in partnership with the Dorset Primary Care Trust.

There has been no dramatic increase in those attending worship as a result of this, but congregations *are* increasing and these are early days. This is a church, though, that *isn't* just for Sundays, a church whose mission is to serve the community right through the week and which continues to look for new ways to do that.

Northlew

Small but Significant

Northlew is a small, very rural village with a population of about 500 adults, situated in west Devon under the lee of Dartmoor. It is 8 miles from Okehampton and because it is so far off the beaten track, the community used to be self-contained and almost self-sufficient, with nine shops trading around the village square within living memory. Now there is only one, along with a pub, school, church and chapel. Unusually for this part of Devon there is still a majority of local people within the parish, but of course there are plenty of incomers who have played an increasing role within local society in recent years. Northlew was badly affected by the foot and mouth crisis of 2001 and a number of farmers have moved out of dairying into different occupations.

In 2001 the decision was made to refurbish the Methodist chapel, which had become rather rundown. As the congregation is only about 20 people, funds had to be raised and, drawing inspiration from Bridestowe chapel, which was running a similar scheme, the chapel members started up a 50/50 shop in an unused, but very ancient shed behind the post office, opening for trade for two hours a week every Saturday morning. This was very successful, and even after the first flush of enthusiasm had passed, the money continued to come in. This was great, of course, but what was an unexpected bonus was that the shed became a meeting place for many people on a Saturday morning. After a year or so the site was needed for building and faced with nowhere to go, we had resigned ourselves to quitting when we were truly blessed through an offer from one of the congregation to pay for the erection of a timber building. This was to be purpose-built, to go on a small, unused area of tarmac behind the chapel. Here was an opportunity which the members grasped with both hands! The new building adjoined the school room and kitchen, both quite modern and in good condition. It was decided to offer tea and biscuits, (which soon grew to include cakes and scones) in the schoolroom, at the same time as the shop was open, and this has become the focus for an increasing number of people to meet on a Saturday morning. Now, two years later, about 30 to 40 people come through our "café" on an average Saturday. Many come just for a chat and a cup of coffee and enjoy the friendship offered. A good proportion of non-chapel goers and one or two people would profess to be atheist, which has led to some interesting conversations! Our most recent development is to offer light lunches once a month. 28 were sold on the first day we tried it, 21 the second time. We wait to see how it settles down.

All this has been achieved with a small group of willing and cheerful volunteers, working on a rota, serving once every six weeks. Devon people certainly know how to show their faith through hospitality and in Northlew they have grasped the opportunity offered to reach out in this way to the community. Incidentally, they have also raised over £8,000 towards the £13,500 needed for the chapel refurbishment and are well ahead of target.

John Peak, Minister

Netherhay Chapel

Netherhay Chapel nestles in the western part of Dorset, close to the Somerset border. Built in 1836 by public subscription, it became a vital link in the witness of Christ to the surrounding villages. In 1887 schoolroom was added to accommodate the growing Sunday school classes and membership.

By the late 1900s the village had seen many changes. Though not much larger in size, the rural scene had changed with many of the young people leaving for university or to work in the towns and cities. The membership had declined badly and closure was very much a possibility, though a few people maintained a faithful worship presence.

Little by little people began to gain confidence. This was helped by existing members being prepared to explore new ideas and welcome one or two new members to the congregation and share hopes with them. The constraints which the building posed for them with fixed pews and no real access to the schoolroom, coupled with inadequate facilities, had meant that they had always held Fellowship meetings, Council meetings and Bible studies in one of the member's homes. But there was a growing feeling that they could be achieving more, if they could only look at their situation more clearly.

The 'Our Calling' initiative was a real beginning and a vision for change was born. Mission was the key word and any ideas that were offered had to fall under this area. By 2004 with a membership of 20, the vision took form. Much conversation had already taken place and dreams had been dreamed. The school play had vacated the premises. At first seen as a threat due to loss of income, this turned into an opportunity - with the schoolroom now freed up, far greater plans could be put into action.

From the very beginning the local villages were invited to be part of all that was happening. An 'Open Day' with presentation, teas and coffee and the most delicious apple cake was a huge success. The church history was displayed and the membership attended and spoke with villagers about their plans. There were many offers of help, from young and old in the community. People gave their skills and time, participating in a talents auction, and even came to help with the work of the refurbishment, for the membership dedicated themselves to the labour of it.

It was not long before the fund-raising was virtually complete. The newly made cross was put in place on Good Friday, with the chapel refurbishment being dedicated in June 2006.

It has not stopped there, though you may be asking, "yes but what about the mission?" Well... a parent and toddler group commenced this autumn, plans are underway to provide a much-needed drop-in centre for the young people of the village, a book club is due to start soon, an after-school club using creative arts is also planned to continue with ecumenical involvement. A tea service was organised to invite all who had helped in any way and for the first time the harvest supper was held in church. Such is the relationship between the chapel and village that they recently put on "Alice in Drimptonland" to raise funds for the chapel and BBC Children in Need. They looked forward to further fund-raising, being for mission and outreach, rather than fabric. Members continue to explore their faith, currently using "Time to Talk of God".

They may be small in number but they are a significant contribution to the ongoing life and witness of the Body of Christ in Dorset.

Liskeard & Looe Circuit, Cornwall

Presence or Presents - to the ear, these two words are the same and for the Liskeard and Looe Circuit in the Cornwall District they took on the same meaning. The publication 'Presence' became a gift. The Circuit Leadership team decided to make this publication available to the small Church communities, as a focus for discussion, with the ordained and lay Staff enabling the sessions.

When the larger Church groups heard that this was happening, they too wanted a piece of the action and therefore every Church in the Circuit (19 churches) welcomed the opportunity to meet and talk. Some met weekly and others monthly, but the whole Circuit was involved.

The unquantifiable, but very positive, results from the study of 'Presence' included :-

- The liberation of ideas.
- The opportunity to express fears and hopes.
- The knowledge that our Christian presence in a place is more than a building.
- That because the building is no longer viable, the Christian presence has not failed.
- A Christian presence is required and needed in every community.

Presence for us becomes the present of freedom to think differently

Dimma Chapel, Cornwall

Dimma chapel, located in the Week St Mary Circuit, North Cornwall, is an old Bible Christian Chapel established mid nineteenth century. Found on the A39 mid-point from Camelford to Bude and was ideally situated when it was originally opened in the midst of several farming communities. Today, however, the chapel is seen perched in a precarious position on a very busy road and a dangerous S-bend and no car park! It currently has only 6 members, and 3 years ago it was at the point when they were preparing to meet as the church council to consider closing procedures. However, as soon as the meeting was convened, it was as though the Spirit of God took over, and declared, Not yet!

The chapel had no local community for outreach, the same 5-6 regular worshippers and with some refurbishment required for the building but they gladly said yes to Gods challenge. 3 Years on, they've decorated inside, replaced 2 leaking stained glass windows with matching double glazed windows, recommissioned the toilet, adopted flexible worship times and are up to date with their assessments.

The chapel has had 4 funerals and a wedding with average attendances 150+. In the last 2 years alone, we have had 8 baptisms that had family links but went no where else. So the chapel considered their strengths and decided to hold this year an afternoon Christmas Party service, decorated the chapel with balloons etc., and invited all these children and parents to the event. Starting with 30 minutes of games, 30 minutes Godly Play interactive nativity service, followed by the feast! A great time was had, with 23 adults and 13 toddlers.

The chapel folk have now issued the invitations to the Easter Celebration party, a Summer BBQ Service and the Harvest Thanksgiving party. Were also considering doing a annual baptism and remembrance service tea, where the families will be reminded of their baptismal promises, and other families will be able to remember their loved ones whom they see no longer. This we see as encouraging new habits of attendance and offering meaningful acts of worship and make that a regular pattern of ministry for this 6 women member chapel, during the Christian calendar year.

Danny Wheadon – Superintendent, Week St. Mary Circuit

Melverley

New Life in Melverley

Melverley is a small village in Shropshire not far from the Welsh border. The tiny Methodist Chapel consists of one room and nestles by the side of the road through the village surrounded by farms, fields and a few houses.

By the end of the twentieth century the few elderly people worshipping there knew that they couldn't keep the cause going for much longer. Sadly they concluded that they would have to close. When the news got to the couple farming right next to the chapel – committed Christians who were brought up at the chapel and attended the monthly services as well as an evangelical church in Oswestry - they said that they would be willing to run a monthly family service.

This service was run on much freer and livelier way than the previous services, with the use of guitar and other instruments whenever possible. But also of key importance was the effort to publicise the services – leafleting local homes and farms. Since it was only monthly this was practical. The leafleting drops also had the advantage of being a useful pastoral contact around the village. Many people who had previously never darkened the chapel door began to come and enjoy the services and they also shared in the leafleting task. It became much more of an all village service with children and adults enjoying worship together. A great help came when a local couple asked to get married in the Chapel; and for this the Chapel was not only licensed for weddings for the first time, but also was decorated, carpeted and the hole in the ceiling was mended.

More recently the people now running the chapel have been able to use the local village hall to run a mid week children's club which has Christian input. The Llanymynech Circuit has stood alongside Melverley Chapel, both supporting services and with financial help for materials for the children's club.

None of the changes that have been brought in have been rocket science. There has been good quality lively worship, and through the leafleting, people have been invited to attend and kept informed as to when the services are. It seems to be a model that could be rolled out much wider.

And finally:

Norfolk & Waveney Churches Together, East Anglia

Following the publication of 'Presence', Norfolk and Waveney Churches Together decided to host a county-wide Forum last March on what it means to be 'an effective, Christian presence'. A good number of people from a wide variety of denominations attended.

As a result, there is to be a poster campaign throughout Lent 2007. Each worshipping household is being invited to display the same A4 poster in a prominent window at home throughout Lent. (The posters are currently being printed and will be distributed next month.)

The idea is that the Christians who live in a particular neighbourhood will be able to identify themselves to one another. And it was the need for identification that came most clearly out of the Forum. Once Christians are known to each other, they might then be encouraged to support one another and pray for the place in which they live. They may even meet together now and then!

All this is seen as being the first steps along the road to creating an effective Christian presence in each neighbourhood.