

# Agricultural Chaplaincy

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‘To this person being Agricultural chaplain is not so much a job as a calling’ so read the nomination for a Countryside Alliance Rural Hero award 2009. (Countryside Alliance 2010) It was then a realisation dawned upon me, the recipient, what a fantastic journey I had been travelling for twenty plus years. That at this particular point in my discipleship journey ‘a round peg had been fitted into a round hole’ and the person who did this for me and with me was God. For me to be called by God was utterly transforming, intellectually, emotionally, socially and spiritually and I still do not feel deserving of such a gift. That calling is for me profoundly rooted in the mysteries of word and sacrament and how this has become embodied in the dramas of my working experiences in rural communities. This living Word, the presence of God, is more than a story written with printed words on the pages of a sacred text. This living Word, the very presence of God, is to be sensed in ordinary and extraordinary life changing situations, particularly for me in a very agricultural and rural context. At the same time it has become increasingly hard to grasp and comprehend this God in the complexity of the many human dilemmas that people face and which I have come across as an agricultural chaplain. Such are the perplexing realities of my growing faith, the longer I journey the less I feel I truly know.

For me the sacrament of bread and wine and the actual physicality of touching and tasting has been enhanced by working and walking with farmers in this vast working, open, living, diverse landscape of Lincolnshire. The sacrament shows in a dramatic way the importance of food and drink as a sacred and spiritual thing that I cannot afford to take for granted. I have come to realise how much I need to acknowledge my Creator and hear afresh and with greater sensitivity what the psalmist could hear, that mysterious praise of fields of wheat and hear the sound of trees and fields clapping their hands in praise. I have learnt and am learning such things as agricultural chaplain.

In like manner the call includes for me the obligations stated in the Methodist annual covenant service. It, the Covenant, has become a source of much challenge and strength in my journey as a minister and agricultural chaplain. The covenant statement, ‘let me full let be empty, let me have all things let me have nothing’ (Methodist Service Book, 1999) have

spoken to me in times of sleeplessness. I have felt vulnerable in situations of helplessness and uncertainty and the utter trust in God that is implied in this statement has been a powerful resource! Ministry can also be incredibly lonely but learning to trust and love the God who is always present, no matter how one feels, is enriching. Equally I have found the ordination petition, 'In all things give counsel and encouragement to those whom Christ entrusts to your care' and the following warning 'let no one suffer hurt through your neglect' point always to an awesome and privileged call to serve.

The agricultural chaplaincy role has given endless opportunities to fulfil the covenantal promise year on year and fail in the duties of ordination in equal measure.

Around the altar of the farm kitchen table 'His Presence makes the Feast' is a reality (Faith and Order report Methodist Conference 2003) as tears, debates and disputes, confessions of affairs amongst the mundane travails of harvest are all shared. Also brought to the farm kitchen altar are anger and frustration at family members and governmental inconsistent policies. As at all altars, the need for healing, forgiveness and a prophetic voice need to be quietly and respectfully heard. Like all true communion gatherings, celebrations are acknowledged and the memory of generations are made real and honoured, At this altar, as at all altars, the voice of justice and truth is heard. As the agricultural chaplain I am placed at this altar and I must be truly human by this I mean, open and non judgemental, compassionate and humane, 'Christ is dynamically present' not by any special invocation but again as God's gift. The chaplain's presence can only hope to mirror something of His presence. I have come to realise that in the ten years, working with farmers and their families, a sense of a willing trust in God and undoubted equipping has been precious and vital.

'The secret of success is to make your vocation, your vacation.'

So Mark Twain has quipped, this happens almost without you truly being aware of it. The vocation is not a chore or a thing to dread but a series of opportunities to learn and be refreshed again and again. I have discovered a quiet joy permeating the vocation and like all good vacations a space for genuine listening to yourself and others nourishes yet more experiences. As agricultural chaplain, like all chaplains, I deal with folk in a specific context, people who feel out of control of their lives and then, alongside and with their permission, enabling them to rediscover their self esteem and know they are valued, is truly fulfilling. Acknowledging with people their physical and spiritual needs, trying to make that connection to love and goodness, beauty and sense of wonder is crucial to the role. These

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practical experiences of my expansive workplace, all two thousand seven hundred square miles of it, permeate my prayers and my worship and go on increasing my sense of longing to know the God who is the source of all created life.

‘When we lose our sense of wonder then we are truly lost’ (MacFarlane 2009 Wild Places)

In agricultural Chaplaincy I have felt I have been taken to that place of wonder through the unexpected routes of vulnerability and stomach churning helplessness. The period of Foot and Mouth in 2001 and subsequent mass scares of avian flu amongst the poultry population and bluetongue disease amongst cattle. All of these created a sense of wonder on two levels one at the sheer resilience of farming people but also, for me, the nearness of God through the support I received from Christians and non Christians alike. I have walked and cried alongside families after a suicide of a son or daughter, father or mother, still one of the highest proportions of those who commit suicide are amongst farmers. Also in the maelstrom of emotions after a farm accident you know you are touching sacred things of loss and hope. To be aware of how people’s choices have led to relationship breakdown or what appear insurmountable crisis of all types, have taken me to depths of wonder, at peoples strength and courage which is simply breathtaking. It is in all these circumstances I have discovered a personal reservoir of strength and indeed insight into the God present.

From these inward experiences of people’s lives, the environment in which I work is wonderful! In agricultural chaplaincy you are literally surrounded by either incredible landscapes, horizons full of crops or livestock. Repeatedly I am confronted by panoramic vistas that literally take your breath away. These deeply personal encounters with individuals and the land and to be truthful with my own personal isolation and loneliness you realise with Rabbi Hugo Gryn:-

‘Spirituality is like a bird if you hold it too tightly, it chokes, if you hold it too loosely it flies away the essence of spirituality is the lack of force.’ (*is that lack of cajoling, hectoring, demanding your interpretation of God in the world or a too rigid interpretation of the very word spirituality?*)

I have found as the agricultural chaplain as I speak and act out with the boundaries of church, parish and or circuit and as I have become intimately known in specific contexts, I know I have been changed and nurtured by that very context. As I have become the space where the distressed are held safely, whether that is the farmer who is contemplating suicide or sitting with wife and children when that farmer has descended into darkness of depression. I see my own fears and try to confront them. In choosing to

walk alongside the hurting farmer as the business is saddled with crippling debt or volatile prices causes massive uncertainty about the future I feel the precariousness of work and how valuable fulfilling work is. When facing the angry, frustrated and confused people who feel they are dealing with faceless ones and the inexplicable twist and turns of crop failure, I have come to know the fragility of the human psyche and the essential need of 'soul' peace and calm. I also have many opportunities to laugh and engage with professionals at dinners and agricultural shows. These include land agents, bank managers and solicitors and I have come to see the importance of trust and truth and the absolute value of partners in resolving problems. The role has forced me to interpret and probe the ethical and moral dilemmas with other researchers regarding genetically modified crops, cloning, crop and animal diseases even in recent days the spectre of 'super dairies' of eight thousand cattle. This has shown me the ingenuity of the human species to resolve and adapt to changing circumstances but also its easy ability to be destructive. I have been lead to examine the complexity and enormity of food trading, locally and globally and thereby a desire has grown in me for greater understanding of justice. Chaplaincy has compelled me to build bridges by chairing debates at National Farmers Union Meeting or Country landowners and Small Business Association meetings and I have discovered the passion and pragmatism of farming communities. Then and not least this chaplaincy role has allowed dreams to unfold combining all of these aspect in a prophetic vision to literally build an eco building, at the time of writing the largest Green events centre in the United Kingdom where people can explore their choices with regard to global warming and climate change. This showed me the power of a small group to turn vision into reality.

However none of these things would have any meaning without framing it all in the context of worship in a variety of contexts. To see and acknowledge God at a new dairy parlour as the family invest in the future, or placing with prayer an owl box at a newly opened estate farm for visiting public is always a joy. It may seem strange to offer a prayer to God at the planting of a tree to celebrate the opening of new accommodation and sports centre for migrant workers at their place of work, but are all these incarnation acts? I have come to see all of these of equal importance to the gathering of communities as they celebrate Harvest Festival, Lammas, Rogation Sunday or Plough Sunday each distinctively rural opportunities to see God at work. I have the care of two congregations in a circuit ministry who embrace and inform my ministry and keep me passionate about the future of the rural Methodist Church. The chaplaincy role has

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confirmed for me and convinces me that the rural church has a vital place in remote and not so remote communities to be a catalyst for Gods work in many new ways which mirror the flexibility and the ability to travel light an important trait of chaplaincy..

What a fantastic journey I have been travelling. Thank you to the Methodist Church for its active support through Home Mission grants.

### **SOURCES**

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### **NOTE**

1 Rev Canon Alan Robson is the Agricultural Chaplain for Lincolnshire