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Listening to the Voice of Rural Church Planters and Pioneers

A REPORT ON WHAT HELPS
RURAL CHURCH PLANTS
BEGIN, GROW, AND FLOURISH



The Gregory
Centre for Church
Multiplication



Contents

Why this research?	3
Executive summary	4
Recommendations	6
How was this research undertaken?	8
Section 1 - God's call	11
1. Called to be with him	12
2. Called to pioneer and plant	14
3. Called to be rooted in a place	16
4. Following God's steps	18
Section 2 - God at work	20
1. Relational practice	22
2. Discipling young people	26
3. Finding roots in the landscape	28
Section 3 - Part of God's Church	30
1. Relationships with other churches	32
2. Freedom, trust and accountability	34
3. Financial issues	36
4. Enriching the ecosystem	39
Section 4 - Theological reflection	40
The Prophetic Voice of Rural Church Planting and Pioneering	42
Section 5 - Recommendations	44
Appendix - Interview Protocol	49



Why this research?

Rural England is home to around 10 million people¹ and continues to grow proportionally faster than urban areas. Yet rural churches face well-documented distinctive challenges, including dispersed populations, limited resources, clergy shortages, and cultural change. Alongside these pressures, there is emerging evidence that new church plants in rural contexts are engaging younger generations, strengthening community life, and fostering new forms of Christian discipleship. Despite this, rural church planting remains significantly under-researched in comparison to urban and suburban contexts.²

This study, *Listening to the Voice of Rural Church Planters and Pioneers*, seeks to address this gap by listening directly to those engaged in starting new forms of Church for the rural context and their partners in three ways.

- First, it seeks to understand where those starting new churches in the countryside are perceiving God at work and how new disciples are being formed there
- Second, it aims to explore the themes which emerge from conversations with rural pioneers, identifying practices, structures, relationships, and cultural conditions that contribute to a healthy and sustainable ecosystem of church life in the countryside
- Third, it intends to amplify the voices and stories of rural practitioners, enabling their wisdom to shape future policy, investment, and collaboration between denominations, dioceses, networks, and local churches

This research has the potential to serve both as a tool for advocacy (making the case for investment and partnership) and a practical guide for those directly engaged in planting and supporting rural churches more widely.

¹ According to Gov.UK data, 17% of England's population (approximately 9.5 million people) lived in rural settlements as of mid-2022.

² Publicly available research tends to be based on the Church of England: Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church (Church of England, 2015) What's in Our Hands? Rural Mission Learning Review (Church of England / Brendan Research, 2025)

Executive summary

Findings

1

Calling to plant in the rural context

Rural church planters' vocations are grounded in a personal relationship with Christ and involve profound commitment to people of a specific rural area. The challenges of low population promote prayerful dependence on God with organic innovation, adapting and utilising whatever gifts of local people and meeting spaces are available. Planters often see their calling as a kind of pioneering mission, joining in with the active mission of God among local people, who are not yet part of any church. This gives rise to many different contextualised forms of church, all of which arise from a spiritually attentive, incarnational approach.

2

Relational practice

Rural church planters value building trust and deep personal relationships over high attendance. They tend to reject complex, high-maintenance church structures, preferring simple meetings which build community. Sharing food and other practices of hospitality are seen as core to directly address the pervasive challenges of rural isolation and hidden poverty. Many planters speak of people who approach the new ministry, having been hurt in various ways. They consciously foster flexible, low-pressure, loving environments where broken individuals can find healing.

3

Discipling young people

Rural church plants frequently involve more young people than other churches in the area. This is associated with the way the churches invest deeply in relationships and simple discipleship to reach younger generations, intentionally working across wide geographic areas to overcome the difficulty of establishing a critical peer mass.

4

Finding roots in the landscape

As well as relating to the natural world in outdoor, nature-based meetings and spiritual rhythms from prayer walking to conservation activities, rural church planters frequently use images and concepts from the natural world to explain their understandings of church, mission and ministry.

5

Enriching the ecosystem

Planters view their unique offering—characterised by flexibility, smallness, and risk-taking—as a way to fill gaps and enrich the wider Christian ecology alongside traditional inherited systems.

They thrive when oversight shifts from rigid control to deep trust, risk-taking permission, and active advocacy. Effective governance models balance this need for agility with support and operational safety, while blended financial models are often used as a way of maximising scarce resources.



Recommendations

Practical applications for denominational leaders, oversight bodies, church leaders and pioneers.

1

Learn from each other: Avoid stereotyping ministry contexts and seek for rural and urban contexts to learn from each other.

2

Pray: Invest in a dedicated, cross-denominational movement of prayer for the countryside, recognising that prayer is transformational for rural mission of all kinds.

3

Dream small: Explicitly value and validate ministries that are not measured by large numbers. Celebrate small discipleship groups as vital spaces for depth, growth, and safe missional experimentation.

4

Give freedom, trust and accountability: Shift rural oversight paradigms toward high-trust, low-control frameworks that grant pioneers the vital freedom to be missionally agile and respond flexibly to the opportunities God provides in rural areas.

5

Learn from young disciples: Other rural churches should attend to factors that have made rural church plants fruitful in ministry with younger generations, including intentional discipleship pathways and collaboration across wide geographic areas.

6

Enable simple, agile structures: Collaborate to establish simple governance options that fit the volunteer capacities and relationality of small rural plants, and enable responsiveness in mission.

7

Contextually discern funding: Support context-specific blends of strategic grants, local giving, tent-making, assets, and community partnerships.

8

Cultivate difference and unity: Intentionally normalise, protect, and celebrate a 'mixed ecology' of church expressions where traditional churches and new plants coexist. Senior advocates should actively support pioneers to navigate ecclesiastical boundaries.

9

Attend to next steps: Oversight ministers and regional leaders are recommended to work with rural church plants to notice learning that can be shared, capture opportunities to plant again and to support leadership transitions for ongoing sustainability.

10

Tell the hopeful story: Actively change the dominant cultural narrative that rural ministry is stagnant or inevitably failing. God is at work in the countryside and churches have stories to tell about the transformation and hope he brings. Rural areas are an exciting mission field and God's work there can be a source of wonder and praise.

How was this research undertaken?

This research set out to listen carefully to the experiences of people starting and supporting new Christian communities in rural areas. It was shaped by the belief that mission is ultimately God's work – the *missio Dei* – and that understanding grows through prayerful attention to scripture, lived experience, and honest conversation. Combining theological reflection with qualitative social research, it sought to go beyond information gathering, and to understand how people made sense of what they believed God was doing in their communities.

Research approach

The study used a qualitative approach, centred on interviews and reflective analysis. Exploring stories, experiences, challenges, and hopes, it asked how rural church planting was understood and lived by those directly involved in it.

The approach reflects the discipline of practical theology which takes everyday Christian practice seriously as a place where theological insight can emerge. Interviews were therefore understood both as accounts of ministry activity, and as reflections on where participants believed God was at work in rural life and mission.

As interviews were completed, recurring themes, tensions, and patterns were identified and explored further in later conversations. This flexibility was an important part of the research design, allowing the study to follow areas of significance raised by participants themselves.

Who took part?

Thirty-six participants were recruited through denominational networks, diocesan mission teams, rural ministry organisations, church planting networks and social media advertising. Some participants also recommended others whose experience might contribute to the research.

These people were asked to complete a questionnaire which provided a wide picture of rural planting and pioneering. The questions were based on those used in earlier fresh expressions research³ and helped the researcher to identify a smaller group of 18 people for interview.

The 18 interviewees had all started new communities which were rooted in a rural context and understood themselves as church in their own right rather than as an outreach project extending the ministry of an existing church. They were chosen to represent a range of geographical and sociological contexts, types of church plant and longevity. Twelve are from the Church of England and six from free churches. None came from Roman Catholic or Orthodox traditions.

While having a clear framework, interviews were designed to feel like guided conversations. This gave participants space to speak openly about their experiences while ensuring that key themes were explored consistently across the study. The research continued until no substantially new themes were emerging from the interviews – a point often described in qualitative research as “theoretical saturation”.

Reflexivity

The lead researcher, Sally Gaze, brought extensive experience of rural ministry, church planting, and national work in rural mission. This provided important strengths, including deep contextual understanding, trusted relationships, and familiarity with the realities of rural ministry. Reflexive practice was used to help ensure that personal assumptions and prior experience did not overpower participants' own voices. The study intentionally makes space for differing experiences, unresolved tensions, and contrasting perspectives to remain visible within the findings.

A note on language

This report generally uses the words “church plant” to mean any form of ecclesial community that has been started, including small ecclesial groups and fresh expressions of Church. Sometimes interviewees identified primarily as church planters and sometimes as pioneers. In general, a “church planter” is someone involved in starting a new ecclesial community or congregation. A “pioneer” is someone engaged in innovative mission work that reaches people outside traditional church structures. Those interviewed fulfilled both descriptions, regardless of whether they intended to church plant or pioneer they found themselves doing both. When telling their stories, I have attempted to use the vocabulary each interviewee preferred.

³ The Day of Small Things (2014) p.18 They needed to engage meaningfully with people beyond existing church congregations, meet regularly, have recognised leadership, a developing shared identity, and a commitment to growing into the wider life and responsibilities of the Church.

1



God's call

1

Called to be with him

Calling for the rural pioneers began not with a task, role, or location, but with their own relationship with God. For some, a particular experience of forgiveness and transformation was significant:

"When I realised what he could do to a broken life, I wanted to share that with others because I had thought I was beyond hope and actually, what He's done is He's completely turned my life into something that... is bringing more people to his kingdom."

All consistently describe their sense of calling as rooted in attentiveness to God's presence and guidance. Discernment was shaped through prayer, scripture, reflection, prophetic insight, and a cultivated sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

Their accounts also highlight the formative nature of calling. Church planters often experienced seasons of waiting, reflection, and gradual discernment before stepping into pioneering ministry. They learned to trust God incrementally, developing humility and patience. Often participants initially resisted the possibility of rural

church planting. One openly stated that he never imagined himself undertaking rural pioneering ministry, while others expressed apprehension about the risks and uncertainties involved. Yet this resistance often became part of the discernment process itself. Participants interpreted their eventual willingness to proceed as an act of obedience, reinforcing their conviction that the call originated with God. Through prayer, God provided the confidence necessary to move forward when circumstances were unclear, further developing their trust in him.

Another recurring theme is the importance of communal discernment and confirmation. Although participants frequently described deeply personal experiences of guidance, they rarely understood their calling in isolation. Spouses, family members, church communities, mentors, and prophetic voices often played crucial roles in confirming and clarifying God's direction.

Rural church planting callings are shaped by prayerful discernment in community and a profound sense of participation in God's mission. They come out of the primary call to be with Jesus and as planters obey the call, they sense that God uses the challenges to deepen their relationship with him and enables them to grow spiritually.

Lighting the match

One pioneer's call started out of hunger that younger generations should be reached by rural churches. She tells how she prayed, "God why can't you bring someone to the villages?" Then as she got up from prayer, she had an overwhelming urge to open her Bible. She continues, "It fell on Isaiah 6. And at the time I was like, 'Oh, it's Isaiah. God's never going to speak to me through the Old Testament.' I was quite a new Christian. So I went to shut it, but as I went to shut it, the words of Isaiah 6:8 - 'Whom shall I send to tell the people this message?', 'Here I am. Send me.' They like jumped out like they were flashing. And I slammed my Bible shut. And I was like, 'That is absolutely not the answer to that prayer. You need to find a different way!' And I cried for quite a long time and I ignored it for quite a long time and I tried to do other stuff."

Years later even after her call to plant a new kind of church in the area had been recognised by the local ministers and diocese, she was still held back by 'imposter syndrome': she had no money, no staff, and no idea how to build a team. Then, God gave her a picture: she saw a beautifully laid fire, neatly piled with sticks and logs. God seemed to be saying that she didn't have to do everything. He had already laid the fire. Her obedience would be the match to set it ablaze.

The relief was overwhelming. She didn't have to manufacture the resources or force the church into existence. When she stepped out in faith, God's faithfulness exploded into view. Suddenly, 'all new people'—strangers they had never met before—began showing up at their door. Miraculously, these newcomers carried the exact same vision, the same dream, and a shared willingness to serve Jesus.



2

Called to pioneer and plant

Interviewees described a clear spiritual conviction that God was asking them to follow where God was already working in the parts of the wider rural community who were not attending existing rural churches. This meant starting something new rather than adapting traditional church patterns.

"...it was a sense of God opening a door for something fresh that we just had to step into... We felt strongly that this wasn't about trying to fix what was broken, but seeing where God was already moving."

Doctrinal differences with other churches were not the most significant motivation to plant a church although these were a factor in three stories. The common motivation was a passion to share faith with people in the area who were not finding faith and Christian community through the existing churches.

Both those who identified as 'planters' and 'pioneers' perceived that they were called to join in work which God had already started. This understanding shifted the emphasis from entrepreneurial innovation to spiritual attentiveness: the call was not initiation but discernment and participation in God's unfolding mission in their community.

The call to pioneer rarely emerged as an upfront career choice. It was typically experienced as a gradual process of discernment in which individuals came to recognise a recurring pattern in God's leading, their gifts, and the opportunities before them. Some described how their late discovery of the term 'pioneer' validated their ministry in a way which was liberating for them:

"Back in the beginning when I started it, pioneering wasn't really a term on my radar. It wasn't what I was calling myself. (The CMS course was) absolutely incredible because it enabled me to say, 'Hey, I'm a pioneer!'"

Pioneering was more than extending existing church activity by entering unfamiliar territory where new forms of community, mission, and discipleship could emerge. Usually some form of new church was part of the vision from the outset, but sometimes it had emerged later on as the needs of the community became clear. Even where the pioneer was continuing to hold ministry responsibility in a pre-existing church, when pioneering, they often used new roles, structures, and expectations in order to engage with the new thing they felt God was doing.

Overall, the call to pioneer and plant was characterised by gradual discernment, courageous risk-taking, obedience amid uncertainty, and a commitment to joining God's redemptive work in new and emerging contexts.



"Absolutely Me!"

One rural pioneer experienced a profound life change moving from city life to a rural area to care for an elderly parent. While volunteering as a chaplain at a place of pilgrimage, she discovered her true calling: bridging faith with heritage, nature, and the local landscape. She felt a deep internal conviction to develop a less institutional, contemplative approach to ministry based out of a well of prayer. She notes: "I thought, 'Oh, goodness me. This is absolutely me'... It was absolutely who I am" and "I became really interested in how do I find and how do I live this calling to be where people are... a much less institutional kind of approach and yet a really deeply spiritual one."

As her pioneering ministry developed, she was ordained on a mountain, wearing her walking boots.

3

Called to be rooted in a place

One of the most striking findings from the interviews is the significance of place within the calling narratives of rural church planters. Participants were not simply called to a ministry function or church planting strategy. They described being called to specific communities, regions, and rural contexts. Some church planters had a long history with the place to which they were called. Almost always, their experience of call was inseparable from the deep conviction that God was sending them to a particular place.

Some planters felt called to invest in a new way in the place where they were already living: one planter explained that Ezekiel 2 had become a key Bible passage which spoke to him because God 'sends'

the prophet Ezekiel to the Israelites while Ezekiel is already living among them: *"When God says, 'I'm sending you,' we often think, 'Well, that must mean Africa or Mongolia or whatever it is.' But it was clear to us that God was saying, 'I am sending you to the people that you're already amongst.' It wasn't, 'Go over there and plant this church'. It was 'Here are the people. You're already living amongst them. You're already connected with them. They need something new.'"*

Other planters were initially repelled by the idea of working in a rural context, but on visiting felt God was calling them to that particular place: *"I'd always told people that we would go wherever God called*

us. But there are some things I just couldn't bring myself to say, I would do. And the three things were rural ministry, pioneering ministry and ecumenical ministry. So this church plant, this rural church plant in an ecumenical context with the job title 'pioneer' could not be further from anything I thought I'd want to do. But my wife and I came up and we both knew early on that God was calling us here: neither of us could admit it to the other person for about a week because it didn't appeal at all. But we had a really strong sense that to not come would be disobedient."

The calling of the pioneering planters involved not merely establishing a ministry presence in a specific locality but identifying with the people, culture, and challenges there. A particularly distinctive feature of rural pioneering callings was a strong missional concern for parts of the community that have experienced decline, exclusion, or disconnection from church life. Pioneers reflected a deeply incarnational understanding of mission in which ministry emerges through listening, relationship, and long-term commitment to a place.

One planter who had arrived from outside as a 'parachute drop', noted that trust, longevity and reputation were "a much bigger deal in a rural place". He confessed that he hadn't planned on a long delay before launching a new congregation but was grateful that the arrival of Covid had prevented an earlier launch:

"I didn't plan to take two years before we launched the church, but I'm so glad that we did because when we launched, most people in the community didn't say 'Who are those weirdos?' They said, 'We know those weirdos!' and I felt like people were rooting for us even if they weren't going to come, they kind of hoped that we would do well because they knew us. The longer you are [here], the more opportunities you get."

The call to a rural place was also frequently accompanied by sacrifice and uncertainty. Relocation often meant leaving familiar networks, secure ministry positions, and established support systems. Rural ministry was commonly perceived as demanding, isolated, and outside the expectations of conventional church leadership pathways. Yet participants consistently interpreted these transitions as acts of faithful obedience. The willingness to relocate demonstrated a belief that God's call was connected not only to what they were doing but also to where they were being sent.

Taken together, the interviews suggest that rural church planters understand place as a central component of vocation. Their calling is rooted in a conviction that God cares for particular communities and invites them to participate in his mission within those local contexts.

Called home

One planter had come to faith in the area to which she was called. After moving away, she experienced a growing 'holy discontent' upon hearing accounts of the churches there completely overlooking outreach to younger generations. On a theological college trip to the Holy Land, she experienced a powerful spiritual realisation about the contrast between urban centres of power and rural spaces, recognising that Jesus chose to spend the majority of his ministry walking alongside normal people in the countryside. This revelation prompted her to ask "Am I being called back home?"

Later, while participating in a church planting course, she was shown a map highlighting future

strategic plants. While leadership focused heavily on cities and universities, this planter immediately felt an internal draw toward the unpinned, empty spaces of her home county. Despite her initial resistance and anxieties about being perceived as an outside 'incomer' from the city, she experienced a definitive, sudden 'light bulb moment' while sitting on a bus, where she accepted that she was meant to plant a church in this rural area.

The divine guidance was strikingly confirmed the very next day when she went to inform her boss of her decision. Without her having shared her thoughts with anyone else, he revealed that God had given him a matching vision six months prior—accurately foreseeing the exact launch date, the precise geographical location, and the specific name she had fixed upon for the church.



4

Following God's steps

Most of the new expressions of church, started by the pioneers, were not part of a national or regional plan. Several of them had not set out to plant a church at all, but church had formed organically along the way. Strategic planning gave way to opportunistic growth. The pioneers identified with organic images of what they were doing and saw this difference in a positive light as listening prayerfully and responding to the opportunities and resources God had provided. As one planter said,

"I really believe that we have to step into what is before us because if we don't, then we're not doing God's mission. We're doing our mission."

"You often have your own ideas and you think you're going to do this and you're going to do that and you're going to do all these things. Actually none of that matters really, because unless you're going to pray and seek the Lord, you're not really going to know what God is asking of you."

The rural environment is relatively resource-poor, especially in terms of people numbers and meeting spaces. Frequently pioneering planters make something beautiful out of a diverse, unpredictable range of whatever tools, spaces, and people are currently available on hand: if they can't find a physical space to meet, they use the challenge for fervent prayer, gather outside even in the snow, or become the guests of the pub, leading to the opportunity to co-create seasonal events. The concept of 'bricolage' and the idea that resource constraint makes people more creative resonated, but it was clearly seen that this creativity came from dependence on God. Contrasting a rural approach with urban planting models, that carry standard roles such as a 'worship pastor', another planter said,

"We use what God's given us because that's who we are. That comes more naturally, I think, in a rural setting."

"I really believe that we have to step into what is before us because if we don't, then we're not doing God's mission. We're doing our mission."

The background is a dark green, textured surface resembling grass or foliage. A large, bright yellow number '2' is positioned on the left side. To the right of the number, the words 'God at work' are written in a white, sans-serif font. On the far right, a golden pitchfork is depicted, with its tines pointing downwards and its handle extending upwards, ending in a triangular shape.

2

God at
work

1

Relational practice

Love

Love for God and neighbour is at the heart of rural church planting. The fledgling church communities often exemplify love by functioning as a 'hospital tent' or 'safe landing place' for the broken. Pioneers spoke of ministry with people processing severe church trauma, deep bereavement, and acute mental health crises. To facilitate psychological safety, they consciously foster flexible, low-pressure environments. For example, an outdoor nomadic church has horizontal, shoulder-to-shoulder walking groups where participants, hurt by church, heal without pressure. Another has intimate kitchen-table gatherings which create communities where individuals feel secure enough to share vulnerabilities. When asked to choose an item to symbolise the character of their church plant, one pioneer chose an anchor to represent

security for buffeted lives. Another chose a wellspring because of their vision to bring wholeness and healing.

Another characteristic of this rural mission is a shift in understanding, where the invitation to faith is intrinsically linked to an invitation to serve. Perhaps because of low numbers, pioneers invite seekers and zero-knowledge community members to help alongside the church from day one. Whether volunteering at a mechanical repair cafe, helping with shoreline cleanups, or supporting fellow parents at a toddler group, individuals become active participants in the church's outreach. In areas of low population, social action looks less like a mass programme, and is more obviously a way of loving each person. Working shoulder-to-shoulder to bless their neighbours, people experience the tangible reality of the Gospel through shared action, sometimes before attending any kind of worship service.

The heartbeat of our church plant is: "We care about YOU"

One rural pioneer described how before the church plant had properly become established, Covid hit. Without losing any of her evangelistic passion that "it's about the gospel first," she and the fledgling team realised that God was calling them to step into the gap in community need.

They stepped into the crisis with volunteers from across the villages, both Christian and non-Christian. Food parcels, medicine deliveries, doorstep birthday celebrations, lifts, phone calls and practical support quickly followed. In a rural context marked by isolation and minimal infrastructure, the church became indispensable. "Whatever was needed, we were there."

In the process, the church plant was suddenly "put on the map." Though previously unknown, the church's name "was rolling off everybody's lips" – among parish councils, schools, GP surgeries and county officials alike. The church became a recognised centre of community life across multiple villages.

Yet this social action also deepened the understanding of mission in the volunteers. They realised that practical care was not separate from evangelism but one expression of the love of God. Social action created opportunities to know people personally, understand the hidden struggles behind "beautiful houses," and build trust within the community.

That trust opened doors for invitation and discipleship. Monthly breakfast conversations about Jesus became a first step for many. Small discipleship groups emerged around the people God brought: children, parents, isolated adults and seekers. These groups were intentionally contextual, designed to "speak their language" and meet people where they were. Later came Alpha courses, worshipping communities, baptisms and new leaders raised from within the community itself.

"God hasn't asked us to dish out food bags... It is about relationship. It is you I care about... The heartbeat of our church plant is that we care about YOU."

Meeting people where they are

One tiny, rural village church was deeply saddened by the absence of younger generations. Their churchwarden encouraged them to conduct a community survey, discovering that local families actually wanted to discuss faith – but they wanted to do it together, prioritising precious family time. Looking for where God was already moving in the everyday, the warden looked at an unusual resource at her disposal – a private swimming pool attached

to an old holiday property. The new expression of church exemplifies Christian love by meeting people exactly where they are, offering a flexible, low-pressure sanctuary. The sessions are limited to just six children and their carers to ensure safety and preserve intimate, deep relationships where everyone is known by name.

Love is woven into the very structure of the group, which balances a distinctly Christian format – including Bible storytelling, floating prayer candles, and worship – with an extended free playtime designed specifically for deep pastoral care and communal checking-in. Over time, the families

have formed an organic 'church family', naturally extending this love by supporting and caring for one another. For many families – who would never otherwise step across the threshold of a traditional church building – the pool has become a church space that is a lifeline in crisis. One child experienced severe developmental and physical delays, but, within the freedom of the water, he strengthened his body, mastered swimming, and blossomed into a joyful, highly confident swimmer. The community sustained the family with unwavering love, demonstrating how a flexible, local sanctuary can bring deep healing and hope.



Hospitality and community building

Many of the church plants chose items such as biscuits or a pint of beer to symbolise their community. Hospitality is a core value for all of them and shared meals are frequent. Even in plants with larger congregations of 40 or 50, there is often a shared meal every month. An urban church plant might have teams for hospitality and community building. In a rural church plant, they are the way the good news is expressed by virtually everyone.

Planting pioneers spoke of the pervasive challenge of rural isolation. Traditional structures are often fading, leaving a social vacuum. Hosting a polished event wouldn't bridge this gap – but the sort of hospitality where the church is both host and guest builds community. Pioneers were often seeking to build the kind of culture of hospitality which looks like open doors and unhurried listening. This also broke down barriers in rural areas which appeared affluent but where pockets of hidden poverty were just under the surface.

People of peace

Due to a nine-month delay in housing availability, one pioneering couple lived in a touring caravan. This period allowed them to integrate into the community as guests rather than hosts, fostering relationships with existing churches and the wider community. They felt God gave the word "peace" and that they were to be "people of peace". In the years that followed they served in countless ways without intending to start a church. They became chaplains at the local racecourse and partnered to start a parent and toddler group and a singing group at a local care home. A community children's wardrobe became a major event in the town. Their intentional focus was always to care for people not connected to other churches and in the end, some of these people asked them to start worshipping as a church. They did this, prioritising

Simplicity, slowness and valuing the small

The rural planters consistently rejected complex, high-maintenance ways of doing church in favour of simple, relationship-based activity. This intentional simplicity ensures the ministry fits the actual capacity of a smaller rural volunteer base and the nature of local community. One church planter explained,

"It's a community here that doesn't work off the back of big events and activities. It works through personal relationship: if my boiler breaks here, I don't go online and try and find a random person. I phone someone that I know in the community who I happen to know is a plumber. So the way that we do discipleship here is let's ground ourselves in the Bible and in prayer and then we will share that with our colleagues, our friends, our family."

Coming to faith in rural areas is frequently described as a patient, multi-year process that cannot be rushed by corporate timelines: deep

"table fellowship" – sharing food and conversation – as a primary way to foster belonging, particularly for individuals who have struggled to find a home elsewhere. This hospitality-based church membership is only a dozen people, but treasured by its members. The reach of its community-building however reaches across the whole town.



encounters matter far more than large numbers. Plans, such as they are, may be based on enabling people to take a journey of discipleship rather than on providing an impressive programme:

"The only thing that's a plan is the journey, the stepping stones. You have this initial gateway where we meet the invitation to the next thing and the invitation to the next thing so that we go on a journey of choice and maturity."

Building trust and relationship over time was described as vital.

Small boats and harbours

One pioneering couple showed the interviewer a painting of a small boat painted by a family member. They explained that it spoke of the nature of the little churches in their dispersed network "being on the move, out in deep water, and able to go where the wind's blowing or where the spirit's leading us". The little boat was an agile fishing vessel which symbolised their value of "contextually driven missional freedom" – the liberty to reshape the church's practices to fit the immediate community rather than clinging to a building or other fixed institutional forms.

When this couple were discerning the move to their current village, God had spoken to them separately through the words of Jesus "put out into deep water and let your nets down for a catch". For them the nets signified the places where they would meet people and share the good news – these turned out to be a coffee shop, a grocery, allotments, and a local cinema.

"I've realised that you can't just land somewhere and expect to change things overnight. God is able to do incredible things but part of what he is doing is with relationships, and building relationship in rural areas takes time and it takes heart."

Some rural church plants were under twelve people. Those which grew bigger also invested in small groups where the values of simplicity, giving time and relationality were honoured. A small group was most frequently the primary place for growing in discipleship and engaging in mission.



They observed that new disciples are not made through large corporate programmes, but rather by drawing people into the little boat as fellow crew members: "The people who've become disciples or exploring discipleship are mostly... the volunteers who are closest to us in making these things happen."

Their wider network gatherings were understood as 'harbours' – places for equipping, restoration and storytelling – which were there to support the small fishing boats.

2

Discipling young people

Rural church plants frequently involve more young people than other churches in the area. This is associated with the way the churches invest deeply in relationships and simple discipleship to reach younger generations, intentionally working across wide geographic areas to overcome the difficulty of establishing a critical peer mass. Apart from two fresh expressions of church with an adult focus and two with a child or teen focus, the pioneers interviewed were involved in multi-generational planting. Several of the pioneers had felt called to start something new, specifically because of a frustration that the existing churches in their rural area weren't effective in helping children or teens to grow in faith. In many cases the generational profile of the church plant reflected that of the local area. It was notable that the presence of children was not enough for these pioneers. Their aim was for all generations to become disciples of Jesus.

The pioneers saw investment in younger age groups as vital. Many prioritised the use of grant funding to employ youth ministers rather than relying on transient volunteers. Some had funded projects such as a lego club or youth radio show but, in the main, those pioneers seeing children and their families come to faith, prioritised relationship building and simple discipleship activities over expensive programmes.

The consistent challenge which rural pioneers worked with was the difficulty of a critical mass of a peer group in low population areas. There were three main ways of addressing this challenge, often used in combination:

- i) They worked over a wider area rather than a single area to bring children, youth or families together. This might be through after-school clubs, school chaplaincy and children's activities.
- ii) They empowered young adults through one-to-one Bible reading friendships or intentional training to lead Bible studies with peers.
- iii) They were intentional in building strong intergenerational community through eating together, engaging in outdoor activities and in accessible worship which was joyful, participatory and contemporary. In these spaces, there was an expectation that children and young people could lead and inspire others as well as adults.

A recurring theme was that of children becoming the primary spiritual catalysts for their families. Instead of parents leading children to church, unwilling or non-religious parents are being "dragged along" by their children's spiritual curiosity and often finding their own faith.

"And a little child shall lead them"

One church plant had Sundays on which the church family scattered to serve their local community. One young family spent the morning doing a community beach litter pick. Afterwards, two ladies came over to sit at their table. The family's young son, who had recently come to faith with his parents and grandmother, boldly looked at the strangers and asked, "Can I pray with you?" He then led them in the Lord's Prayer, which he had practised in kids' church.

In another place, a 10-year-old boy heard about Jesus through school assemblies. Spurred by spiritual curiosity, he told his parents he wanted



to follow Jesus. His non-religious mother, eager to support her son, reached out to the church plant team. The team spontaneously created a contextual four-week programme for the whole family to explore Christianity together. As a result, the children were baptised, and their mother began reading Christian books, exploring discipleship alongside her children.

"Teens can worship in a village"

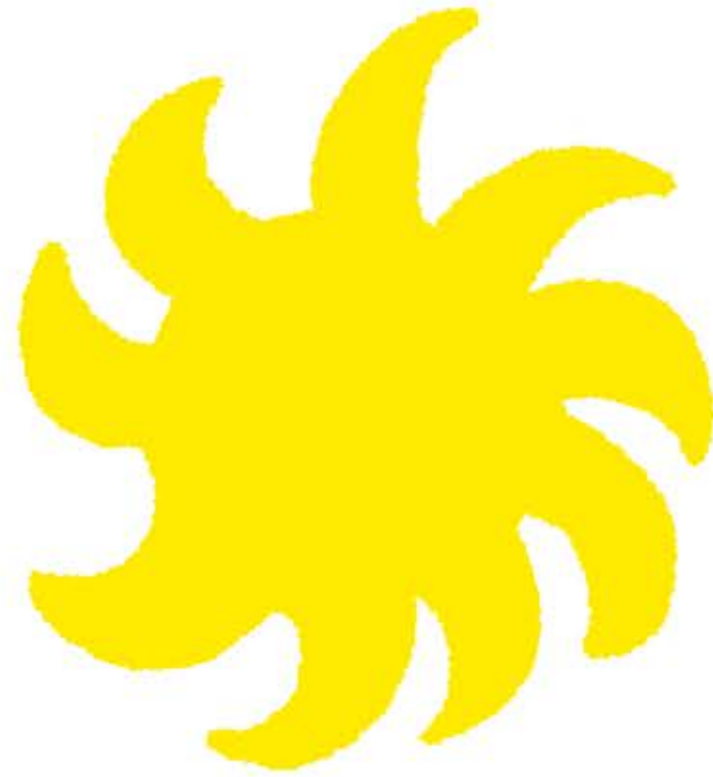
Driven by a deep frustration with the lack of modern, youth-friendly worship in rural villages, one mum refused to accept that families had to commute to city churches once their children became teenagers. "We should be able to worship with teenagers in villages," she insisted. Her desperate prayers led to her call to pioneer something new in the valley where she lived – a church where hospitality and community and joy were to the fore: an intergenerational community which ate together, walked together and where the hour-long service was "fully interactional".

God began drawing in "loads of under 30s" in "quite supernatural ways". In one remarkable instance, a local girl who claimed she didn't believe in faith suddenly began reading her Bible. Her explanation?



Since stalling her horse in a church leader's field, "her whole TikTok feed had sort of been taken over by people posting things about why she should read the Bible... and why she should find out who Jesus is."

Through joyful, authentic, relational community, young people are finding a spiritual home. In an area where few churches are attended by younger generations, she now wonders at what God is doing: "We've got 18-year-olds that come every week!"



3

Finding roots in the landscape

Nearly all the church planters spoke about how the community they had planted related to the natural world through outdoor, nature-based meetings and spiritual rhythms from prayer walking to conservation activities. They saw this as a great way to do intergenerational church, to build community and often engaged in ecological activities.

The landscape they inhabited also affected the way they thought about the nature of their church and ministry. This was evident when they were asked to choose an item to symbolise their community – acorns, saplings and trees, springs and water and the shoreline all featured.

The three new church communities which met outside the most were affected by it most profoundly. In these new church communities, the walls are gone: they talk about being a “church without walls”, “church on the move” or a “nomadic community”. Traditional elements of worship like

hymns and sermons are replaced by organic, outdoor rhythms. They gather around firepits, climb mountains or walk along the shore. Spiritual practices directly incorporate the immediate environment – such as treating a local beach clean or looking after a curated “prayer garden” as literal acts of Sunday worship. One pioneer talked of how the walks of her community are divided into sections with intentional “ponder spots” where hikers are encouraged to walk in total silence. They teach that God speaks as the third person in conversation, through the silence, and through the landscape itself. A second pioneer talked about the landscape as a “Cathedral of Cathedrals in the fells” because of the way people walk to the mountain cairns, gather, give thanks to God, and reflect there. A third saw God providing a “gentle immersion in beauty” to heal where a heavier emphasis on doctrine had been a barrier to people’s ability to connect with him.



The tide and the shoreline

One pioneer chose the tide and the shoreline as central symbols for his community because they represent the rhythmic, changing nature of life and spiritual practices. The shoreline is like his church, an ever-changing liminal space where sacred and secular meet.

Drawing on the metaphor of Holy Island, he describes a healthy spiritual rhythm based on the tide: at high tide, the causeway is closed and cut off by water, it symbolises a time of retreat to seek shelter, refuge, and close embrace with God. When the tide goes out and exposes the causeway, the community’s vision turns outward to serve and welcome the world. He emphasises that a healthy community requires a balance of both rhythms, allowing them to discern when to focus outward and when to gather closely together to support one another.



3

Part of
God's
church



Relationships with other churches

The rural pioneers were conscious of navigating a complex, highly interdependent ecclesial scene which was often discussed in terms of an 'ecosystem'. While their circumstances varied, they all expressed a desire for local complementarity across denominations and styles. The relationships of the church plants with other churches and denominations ranged from highly integrated partnerships to carefully navigated tension.

a) Highly integrated partnerships

The most highly integrated partnerships were generally Church of England fresh expressions of church, with governance as part of a benefice or under a PCC. The relationship required a great deal of investment of ministers on all sides but when established was highly effective.

"I need to create a safe space for them to be able to tell me how they're feeling. For me to be able to say, 'I'm really sorry. Is there anything that I can do differently? Is there something that I

can do that can help us to together build God's kingdom in our own unique ways as God has called us?' You know, I think that friendship goes a long way."

Smaller fresh expressions of Church in benefices were able to reach sections of the population who wouldn't come to a church building, extending the ministry of a multi-parish benefice. One pioneering vicar explained how a weekly fresh expression of church was valued for offering "presence and continuity" in a situation where traditional services rotated around many villages.

Two of the larger Anglican church plants deliberately limited themselves to afternoon services on a Sunday in order to facilitate greater complementarity with morning services elsewhere. They are seeking to work with local churches so that sharing increases mission capacity overall. In this model, the plant acts as a central hub providing ministries, like youth groups, that "small, resource-strapped rural parishes can share in and claim as their own".

Further examples of both these models of collaboration were seen in the responses to the questionnaire.

b) Informal collaborations

Free church plants had more freedom to develop their own identity – and often used this freedom to support the ministries of other churches or to work collaboratively locally. When they first arrived in an area one pioneering couple worshipped each Sunday in the different churches in the rural town to get to know them and build partnerships. Another couple who pioneered a long-established church plant is now facilitating a variety of ways of Christian service in the village including a coffee shop, a grocery and even a cinema. These are run with volunteers and financial contributions from all the local denominations.

c) Carefully navigated tension

A sizable number of pioneers of all denominations and streams had experienced painful rejection or criticism from representatives of the local established church. Holding parish boundaries very tightly was named by one as "an interesting block to mission". Pioneers spoke of how they sought to keep channels of communication open and find ways to build closer relationships.



God's amazing work

One pioneer's journey had begun with a fresh expression of church in her home for people who wouldn't at first dream of going to church. It initially encountered a lot of misunderstanding, but through prayer and perseverance, grew into becoming a blessing for the parish church and a retreat centre valued by the diocese. Relationships formed through hospitality, coffee mornings, shared meals and gentle invitations into Christian community. Gathering around food, fires and conversation allowed faith to grow naturally in: often people who came to faith or who returned to faith would spend time with them and then root themselves in a parish church closer to home. That was fine with the team: "We just want them to meet Jesus."

Retreat ministry expanded from this community because of the recognition of the need to spend time with God to receive healing and strength.

When the pioneer became ordained and began to lead services in the church near her home, significant numbers of local people had already experienced her hospitality. This included many new people who had moved in with children which she saw as an answer to prayers to "bring life" to what had been a very static village. What began with a congregation of just four people has grown to around forty, with children, baptisms and a range of new services. Parish, fresh expression and retreat now strengthen one another. The pioneer says, "That isn't us. That's nothing we've done. That is just God doing the most amazing work."

2

Freedom, trust and accountability

Freedom, trust and accountability were considered vital to rural church plants finding a healthy place in the wider ecosystem of God's kingdom.

Often, oversight comes from a senior minister in a more traditional church and where too much control is exercised, the pioneer is unable to follow their call to be agile in mission. However, where oversight comes with advocacy, relationship and permission to take risks, all the relationships of the planter are blessed by it.

The governance and support structures under which rural pioneering planters operated varied according to the size of the church plant and its denomination. The main models mentioned in interviews and in the questionnaire were:

i) Governance of a long-established parent church.

In the Church of England, this was a PCC but there were equivalent arrangements for older free church denominations. This arrangement was the quickest to establish, leading to good collaboration with the parent body, but risked restricting agility for mission. It worked best when the oversight body had a strong commitment to, and understanding of, the pioneering expression of church. It was vulnerable to changes in leadership. It was most suitable for very small forms of church.

ii) Governance under some kind of missional network church.

This could be a dispersed network church or a larger church plant, planting again. In the Church of England the rural church plant would be a distinct congregation within an existing Bishop's Mission Order with charitable status. The great advantage of this arrangement was that the governance of missional network churches is already attuned to the priorities of pioneering mission. They therefore offer support and relieve planters of some administrative tasks while facilitating missional agility. However, such oversight bodies can be perceived as a threat by small traditional churches in the area and so the local church plant needs to take special care in building strong local relationships.

iii) Becoming a church with its own charitable status and governing body.

This allowed for maximum freedom but was labour intensive. This model tended to be adopted by those who had a clearer idea of the shape of the plant from the outset, often coming from newer free churches. Self-governance was accompanied by seeking voluntary oversight and support from larger networks.

The common factors were the search for simple, agile structures which gave freedom to respond to missional opportunity along with oversight structures which brought safety to the operation of the church plant.

Trusting oversight

One planting story began with an oversight minister's prophetic vision and a beautiful, derelict chapel that had stood unused for 20 years. A community worker was employed to discern what God wanted in the village. Her true calling to pioneer soon became clear. Over eight years, she focused on prayer and building relationships, starting by meeting Christians individually and connecting them through shared vision. The relational approach blossomed. Central to this were 14 community groups, such as a Repair Cafe, a Grief Group, and a Pop-up Cafe in the local pub.

Going "out and being with the people where they are at" has grown trust and relationships and led to people coming to faith and a new church. Its worship gathering is a dinner church, which attracts

approximately 40 attendees, with 14 in formal membership. Weekly Life Groups provide space for going deeper in faith.

A restoration plan for the listed chapel is underway to provide a home for the new church-community partnership. The pioneer was keen to explain how crucial the minister overseeing her pioneering has been. "I have only been allowed to do what I've done because he has fully trusted me, has understood the vision, and knows how God is moving on the outside of our buildings."



The safety net

Having previously served on urban estates, one soon-to-be-pioneer had never considered rural ministry until he was invited to join a diocesan pilot project. Appointed as a mission associate, he felt an urgent call to respond to the needs of local families. The diocese provided a clear strategy, granting him the freedom to prioritise this new contemporary service over

traditional expectations of fairness across the multi-parish benefice. Knowing he was fully backed by his bishops and archdeacons gave him the confidence to start a new worshipping community and help the more traditional churches in his care to receive it into the benefice family. Reflecting on this empowering support, he noted, "It's not massively in my nature, but I feel like there's enough of a safety net that I can walk the tightrope."

3

Financial issues

In areas of low population, the numbers of people in a church plant are likely to be small and therefore the potential for financial giving is smaller than in a more densely populated area. Different pioneering church planters practised and advocated for different solutions to this constraint. The main ingredients in all these solutions were the giving of the congregation, donations from supporters, seed-funding from a denomination, grants, asset-based approaches, hybrid ministry and reliance on volunteers:

i) Congregational giving

There was a noticeable difference between the solutions proposed by planters in affluent areas and those for whom a large proportion of their ministry was with people in poverty. The former tended to be able to fund at least a part-time church minister from congregational giving within a few years. The latter faced relying on grants, relying on spare-time ministry or making significant personal sacrifices:

"There's lots of seasonal work here. So, financially planning in terms of giving has been particularly difficult because of our demographic."

"My wife is at home with the children, so mine was the only income to the home and we lost that for two and a half years."

ii) Donations from supporters

Rural ministry in poorer areas may be supported by donations from individuals from other areas who wish to fund the mission:

"We set up an account with stewardship and got support through the generosity of donors"

iii) Seed funding and grants

Some of the plants had been funded through national grants for strategic interventions. This often involves a significant funding intervention in a central resource church to then resource subsequent missional planting activities that will not require the same level of funding.

One pioneer planter described the ability to hire team members (such as a kids, youth, and families pastor) as an "absolute game changer" for providing great ministry, mission, and evangelism in schools. Funding to spend on mission with younger generations was the most valued intervention and impacted across large rural areas.

This kind of external funding (like DIP funding), "supercharges growth" by front-loading resources. It removes immediate resource challenges, but there was acknowledgement that it might create an artificial runway, especially in areas of rural poverty. The initial grant expires

long before the local congregation is numerically or financially large enough to absorb those operational costs which may exacerbate the long-term challenge of developing a culture of giving and sustainability. Leaders must be mindful of the trade-offs, accepting the risk that if a culture of giving is not successfully built, the endeavour "will in that sense fail" after the funding period ends. One planter had turned down the opportunity to receive such funding:

"I felt really strongly that God wanted us to be slow, steady and sustainable. I've been part of a church where we got a massive influx of money and then five years down the line you have to cut paid posts because the giving hasn't matched it and I don't want to be like that."

Others who had received funding made the point that longer is needed for a community of new Christians to become self-sustaining than the three to five years often granted.

iv) Hybrid ministry

Long-term sustainability frequently relies on tentmaker leadership arrangements, where leaders balance pioneering with other employment. This model requires a high degree of adaptability, shared responsibility among a core team of local leaders. Often a planter may be responsible for other churches within the area of the church plant. This can lead to stronger relationships between churches but it also means that any tensions are painfully and constantly present.

v) Reliance on volunteers

Many of the pioneer leaders were ministering unpaid and their teams were largely unpaid too. Working together helped to build community. However, it could easily also become a constraint on growth. Most commonly the expertise that leaders most craved was the availability of consistent children's and youth ministers.

vi) Asset-based approaches and partnerships

Many rural pioneering planters practice what we might term a 'theology of abundance', viewing resource limitations (of people, time, and skills) as a "creative constraint" rather than a weakness. This forces the church to use "what God's given" rather than falling into the trap of trying to replicate any idealised "cookie cutter model". Often this leads to creative partnerships which prove even more valuable for building community as there are for financial needs. Adapting to this constraint is part of an incarnational ministry but that does not mean it is without cost.

Blended approaches

From the variety of solutions proposed by rural pioneering planters it seems that funding rural mission requires contextually discerned, blended financial approaches. In wealthier areas, the plants were often able to become self-sustaining through giving, especially if they remained simple.

For most plants, alongside giving, there will be an emerging mix of tent-making, volunteering, grants, building local fundraising avenues, and partnering with others to do local mission together.



Partnerships in an evolving journey:

One new ecclesial community began in a rural valley as an outdoor initiative rooted in ancient scripture. It was sparked by a pioneer who spotted young people gathering under a large oak tree and found herself drawn into their big questions about God. She felt called to start an evolving journey to reach these young people who were much happier to talk about God outside than to come to church. As the vision grew, a dedicated core team formed organically through the pioneer's parishes. Local twenty-somethings who stepped up as youth leaders, a resource coordinator who connected through a community funeral, and a trained youth minister seeking a fresh calling.

Mindful of building connections, friendships and partnerships, the community has adopted a flexible identity. While keeping a consistent primary name, they fluidly use different subtitles like "the church on the move" or "the church without walls". This enables different streams within the initiative. The new ecclesial community for unchurched young adults is quite small. However, alongside this are larger gatherings

where committed Christians find a new dimension to their spirituality by exploring nature in outdoor locations. This has brought favour for the initiative as a whole and sparks curiosity about faith.

Early on, the initiative was funded as a diocesan church planting initiative. Other partnerships soon followed with the founder, acting as a creative entrepreneur, integrating the community into existing networks. They first joined forces with a regional heritage initiative to lead historic walking trails, utilising tourism funding for free publicity. Next, they aligned with a local agricultural charity that provided free community transport to support isolated rural residents. Most recently, the community signed a formal agreement with a wealthy philanthropic wellness estate; the estate provides spectacular outdoor space and funding, while the community supplies the spiritual expertise to lead contemplative retreats. By expanding further to partner with a wilderness photography and trekking initiative, this innovative new Christian community has intentionally shared resources and built up the collective goodwill needed for longer term sustainability and growth beyond its original parish origins.

4

Enriching the ecosystem

A common perspective was to see the church plant as a new offering enriching the wider Christian ecology. The analogy of an agricultural monoculture was used to illustrate the view that relying on one system would be unhealthy, even if that system had much to commend it like the Church of England parish system. One planter explained church plants contribute to filling the gaps that traditional parish churches couldn't fill.

Reflecting on the nature of the distinctive contribution of their church plants to the wider ecclesial ecosystem, church planters named the learning that people who weren't being attracted to traditional churches could be reached in a variety of other styles and ways. They felt that this learning could arise because of the flexibility, risk-taking, and creativity which arises from being new and small.

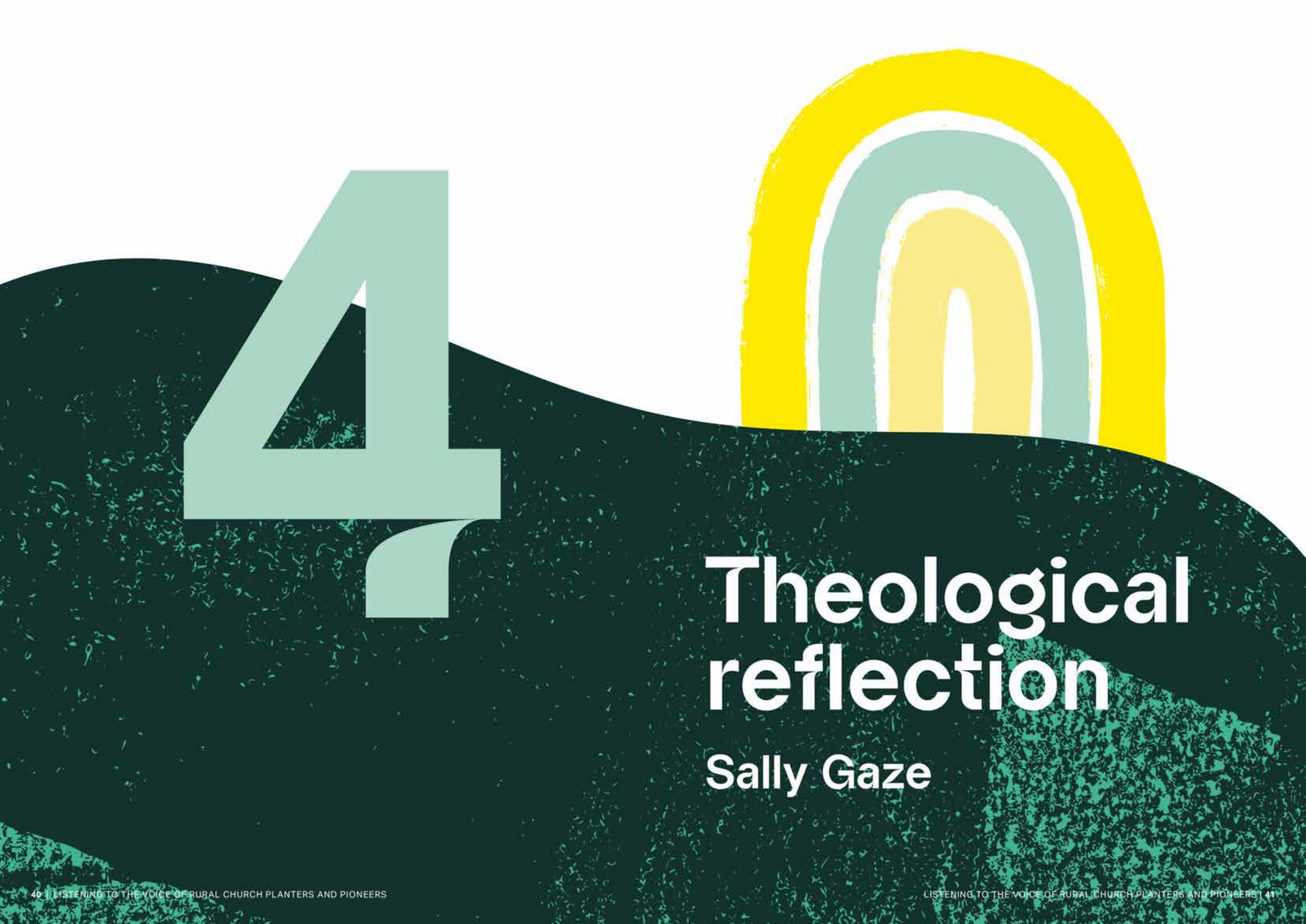
"The spontaneity and risk is not in the DNA of an inherited parish church. It is not a natural thing because of the way they've been doing things for so many years."

"What I've been asked to do is not just to come and plant a church but to plant a movement of church planting churches."

"Rural communities have very long memories and change is slow so to start something from scratch was helpful. Nobody in our church says, 'That's my grandfather's pew' because we're brand new".

The rural pioneering pioneers had an understanding of wider church life which was very like the diverse life in an ecosystem: some initiatives are like annual plants – meant for a specific season but their fruit pops up elsewhere rather than in the continuance of that specific plant. Others put down roots and mature slowly over years. Some of the pioneering planters had already handed over leadership to their successors or were in the process of doing so to enable ongoing flourishing beyond their own tenure. A significant number of the rural planters also saw their ministry as starting life in the one part of the countryside, which was bearing seeds for fruitful life elsewhere.

"What I've been asked to do is not just to come and plant a church but to plant a movement of church planting churches."



4

Theological reflection

Sally Gaze

The Prophetic Voice of Rural Church Planting and Pioneering

We have listened to the voices of rural pioneering church planters: What is God saying to the wider UK Church through them and through the new church communities which they represent?

In scripture, the prophets do not merely announce particular truths. They expose false stories by which societies live their lives; they call people back to forgotten aspects of God's good will for his world and challenge their hearers to live by that vision. It is in this sense that rural church planting has a prophetic voice.

Aspects of contemporary culture present power, wealth and security as sources of human flourishing. Even the Church may absorb these values until we almost believe that by controlling these things, we could cause the church to thrive. In these terms, concentrating church planting efforts in areas of high population would be more logical. There is an obvious ceiling on growth in areas of low population. Rural places become negligible within this worldview; peripheral places of decline rather than central to divine purpose.

Yet the biblical worldview refuses to measure worth by numbers. The Jesus who wandered around rural Galilee with a few followers and no fixed abode and whose shameful execution transformed history challenges human assumptions about where significance is to be found. A call to rural church planting is a living example of God choosing the things that are "powerless"⁴ for his work.

During the period of the research, I heard one story of a rural church plant which had arrived in an area with disregard for the church already in the area. This is not the situation I encountered through the interviews. Rather, these church plants were profoundly aware that they were humble parts of a wider church family and were seeking to bless others. This is crucial for their witness to be prophetic.

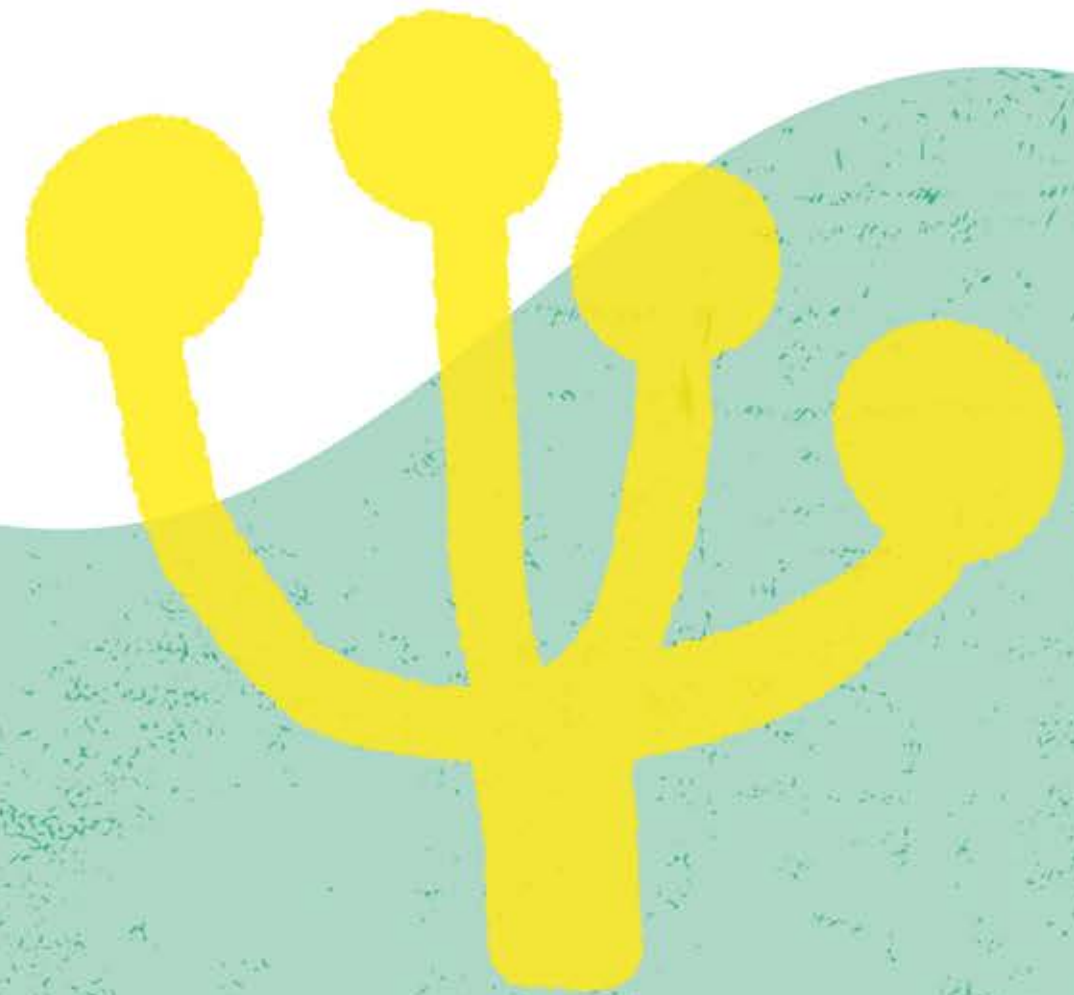
Such prophetic witness is not nostalgia for a rural idyll. The biblical prophets were not so much defenders of tradition as heralds of renewal of the heart in a new situation. In the same way, the prophetic witness of rural church planting does not seek escape from the realities of the modern world. Rather, its endeavour serves as a living critique of secular narratives. It exposes the truth that people are not consumers, community is not simply a network of transactions and land is not merely a resource.

Instead, people are precious children of God – we can join the good shepherd in rejoicing over the return of a single sheep to the fold.⁵

Community life in a rural church plant is made up of simple worship, small groups, humble hospitality, shared lives and service where everyone has a part to play. The body of Christ⁶ is messy and often wounded – but in his strength, can make a profound difference.

The land, created by God, is received as blessing: its rhythms and seasons provide us with ways to own our creatureliness and dependence on God. It reminds us that the smallest mustard seed can produce an abundance of life.⁷

Like wild flowers growing in a changing ecosystem, rural church plants respond to the reality that the spiritual conditions around them are changing rapidly. From their humble and vulnerable position, they often perceive features of the habitat that may be less visible elsewhere. In doing so, they remind us that the Church is an ecosystem of mutual dependence, in which God provides for us through our interconnected life together, what is needed for all to bear fruit. The question, then, is how we will respond.



4 1 Corinthians 1:27

5 Luke 15:5-6 Matthew 18:13

6 1 Corinthians 12

7 Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19

5

RECOMMENDATIONS



1 Learning from each other

These recommendations translate the findings of the research into direct application for the wider Church. They are not only for the future encouragement of rural church planting but intended to help different kinds of ministry and different contexts learn from one another.

"Can we bring some of the lessons from city ministry to rural spaces and discover that they actually work, but equally discover that the lessons of rural ministry have a lot to teach the other direction."

"That's a lesson that the rural context has to teach other contexts. What does it look like to use the things that God's given you? And to do that creatively, not not as a limitation, but a creative constraint."

2 Pray

Networks and denominational leaders should invest in a cross-denominational movement of prayer for God's work in the countryside.

This recommendation comes out of the experience of rural pioneering planters that prayer is transformational. Their stories overflowed with nights of prayer, seasons of prayer and fasting and prayer walking. They also greatly valued the opportunity to pray with others – especially those who were also involved in rural mission and those to whom they looked for pastoral oversight. Prayer goes hand in hand with feeling cared for:

"Rurally we are quite spread out and it can be quite a lonely job, especially pioneering, where you're constantly stepping into new things: having a community of rural pioneers to pray with, sharing joy, but also when things have gone wrong or or you feel that you've not met the mark, is invaluable."

"The thing that was most supportive was pastoral and prayer support from above - a bishop who phoned me regularly at the start just to check how I was doing, to ask how my prayer life was, to ask how my family were and knew my family by name."

3 Dream small

Church leaders and those responsible for strategic mission should:

- a) Recognise and value ministry which is not measured by large numbers
- b) Encourage, value and bless the work of small discipleship groups

These recommendations come out of the rural pioneering experience that small numbers are not a failure, but a deliberate choice for depth. Real transformation happens when you are willing to invest deeply in the few, trusting that this will eventually bring wider blessing.

One rural pioneer told the story of how they began getting large numbers, but at the expense of reaching the very group they were called to reach:

"We prayed, 'God is this really what You know we're about?' and we had to be so trusting and say, 'Well God says 'No: It's not about the numbers.'"

"It's about bringing people into encounter and engagement with God, who have not done that before – and who actually don't want to be in large gatherings."

She continued,

"When [Jesus] was intimate with his people in the upper room or on a mountainside, I think we're talking about fewer than 20. And it's because of the depth of the growth rather than the massive numbers of the growth (then), that we have the church around the world (today)..."

The practice of small discipleship groups was valued by all the rural pioneering planters. For many these small groups were fishing vessels for evangelism too. In these small groups or teams, relationships can grow and individuals can try new things for God in a safe environment. The planters commended being on mission in a small group, rather than alone or just attached to a larger congregation.

4 Give freedom, trust and accountability

In order for rural church plants to flourish, overseers should offer high-trust, low-control accountability which gives freedom to respond flexibly to the opportunities God provides. Rural pioneering planters need the freedom to respond flexibly to mission opportunities, there and then. One pioneer compared it to catching a bus; in the countryside buses come less often, so you have to be trusted to seize the moment when it arrives. At the same time they deeply value the safety that good oversight brings.

"The big thing for me and the success of this mission was the freedom to be released fully and trusted to be spontaneous and to step into where we saw God working."

"One thing was clear that we wanted oversight because we needed the wisdom of it... Everything really was started from scratch... so in that sense, it was harder, but it gave us a lot more freedom... in terms of what we did in practice there was a huge amount of freedom."

5 Learn from young disciples

Other rural churches should learn from the practices which have caused rural church plants to grow disciples in younger generations. This includes investing in intentional discipleship pathways, deep relationships, informal participative styles and collaboration across wide geographic areas.

6 Discern simple, agile governance

Denominational leaders, partners, and oversight bodies should actively collaborate with rural pioneers to establish flexible governance frameworks and sustainable, blended financial strategies.

This recommendation arises from the reality that complex structures do not fit the volunteer capacity or geography of small rural plants. Leaders appreciate guidance to find slimline structural options that enable missional agility and protect teams from burnout.

7 Identify context-appropriate funding

Because low population densities limit congregational giving, funding models must be context-specific. While front-loaded or strategic grant funding can act as a 'game changer', it risks creating an artificial runway if the grant expires before a tiny local community can absorb operational costs. A healthy approach requires a contextually discerned blend of local giving, tent-making leadership, volunteering, and asset-based approaches and civic partnerships.

"In our context if we had planted differently we would reach different people. I don't think there's a right or a wrong. They're just different. I think what is essential is that you have to design the form of mission and ministry that matches the resources."

8 Cultivate difference and unity

It is recommended that senior and local church leaders intentionally normalise, protect, and celebrate a wide variety of different expressions of church, as part of deep relational unity. This includes actively supporting rural pioneers to navigate ecclesiastical boundaries.

Rural pioneers long for a 'mixed ecology' where traditional congregations, new church plants and different denominations are all deeply valued. As an Anglican pioneer observed, *"One of the beauties of the Church of England is that there's something for everyone, but it's not always represented in villages."*

When pioneers face suspicion, or boundary rigidities that view the parish as their exclusive patch, they need gentleness and humility to disperse the sense of threat. They also need support from senior advocates who can navigate complex ecclesiastical systems. Difference can be cultivated as a way of offering the gospel to many different people with different needs.

"It's a spiritual One Church because we coexist alongside each other in our differences for the same purpose, which is God's great commission... Having difference creates safe spaces for people that are different to us. It's a beautiful thing to have difference."

9 Attend to next steps

It is recommended that rural pioneers are enabled to attend to God's next call with proactive support from their oversight ministers and denominational structures. This includes:

- i) recognising that long-term flourishing requires a process of anchoring a church plant beyond the personality of its original founder.
- ii) listening to the dreams of the community and planter for other next steps to apply the learning from their church plant or plant again elsewhere.

"Somebody asked me the other day, what is so wonderful? What value does (the pioneering church plant) add to the diocese as a whole? And I said, well, imagine this. You're going to do a church plant in a new build area and now you have a choice. You can now choose the inherited model of church. You can choose the mixed ecology kind of church or a fresh expression or start with a small group. You now have experience in how people engage and connect with God and can now have a choice. You're not sitting with just this one way."

10 Tell the hopeful story

Churches of all kinds should actively share stories of God's transformative activity in the countryside.

This report was undertaken against a backdrop of a widespread, negative narrative that rural ministry is inevitably failing or stagnant. One planter told how his sense of call to a rural context was questioned during his ministerial training as a "waste" of his gifts. He felt that the rural ministry was stereotyped as if it were all about "harvest festivals" and "blessing the plough" and nothing else. Another remarked that some of the approaches from urban ministry work well in rural contexts if we are open to this possibility. He added, *"Part of the ministry in our context is to tell a better story of what could what what God is doing and what the opportunities are."*

This report shows that the greatest barrier to local growth is often a lack of expectation rather than a lack of opportunity. God is on the move in rural areas through all generations – and his work is marked by hospitality, connection with creation and close community in small groups.

Rural areas are a vibrant, exciting mission field today in Great Britain, just as they were once for Jesus. We can all tell that story.

Appendix – Interview Protocol

The aim was to capture the 'voice' of those starting new rural church communities through a conversation, which was both free-flowing, but at the same time, conducted with an underlying structure. The interview protocol supported consistent and comprehensive coverage of the subjects and provided a framework to consolidate and interpret the information, in order to reach evidence-based decisions.

Preparation

All participants received clear information explaining the purpose of the project, what participation would involve, how the material would be used, and their right to withdraw at any point. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and based on informed consent. All research data was stored securely in accordance with UK GDPR requirements.

An introduction, including the research aims and six main areas of exploration/questions, was sent to interviewees before the interview to enable reflection. Interviewees were asked to bring an object or picture which symbolised the identity or important characteristics of the new church today.

The interviewer had prompt questions available which were not shared in advance.

Introduction

- Remind interviewees of the research aims (See "Why this research?")
- Assure/remind them about confidentiality, anonymity and that they can pause or stop the interview at any time
- Emphasise the fact this is a learning conversation
- Check they are happy to record, and if they have any questions before proceeding

Questions

Section 1: Background and Calling (Research Aim 1)

To start with, please would you share a five-minute story about how your journey to start a new church community in the countryside began

Prompt questions, if needed:

- What led you to begin this particular initiative in a rural context? (What had you seen, felt, thought?)
- How would you describe your sense of calling to this work?
- What helped you to get started? (Why do you think this didn't just stay as something you thought/felt? – explore both internal and external factors here)
- Were there any barriers or challenges to be overcome in the early stages?
- If so, what were they?
- How did you overcome or work through them?
- At what point did you and/or others label what you were doing as starting a church?
- How were you aware of God's guidance in the early days?
- Did you think about it/speak about it in any other ways? If so, what?

Section 2: Perceiving God at Work & Discipleship Formation *(Research Aim 1)*

Where do you currently perceive God most clearly at work in your new rural church community?

Prompt questions, if needed:

- Before this conversation, I asked if you could find an image or object that communicates something of the character of your new church community. Tell me about the object/picture you have chosen. (Send me picture if possible).
- Can you share a story of when you have seen God at work in your church community?
- Can you share a story that illustrates spiritual growth or transformation among individuals or groups?
- What does discipleship look like in your setting compared to other rural church models?
- How do people typically come to faith, deepen faith, or re-engage spiritually in your context?
- What spiritual practices or rhythms seem especially fruitful in rural settings?

Section 3: Practices, Structures, and Sustainability *(Research Aim 2)*

What practices, structures and freedoms have been most important in establishing and sustaining your new church community?

Prompt questions, if needed:

- What structures (organisational, financial, leadership, relational) support this ministry?
- How do partnerships with local churches, denominations, dioceses, or networks function in practice?
- What cultural conditions in your community help or hinder new forms of church?
- What challenges have you faced in building something sustainable long-term?
- What adaptations have you made because of rural geography, scale, or resources?

Section 4: Relationships, Community, and Ecology *(Research Aim 2)*

How would you describe your relationships with the wider local community?

Prompt questions, if needed:

- What role do trust, presence, longevity, and reputation play in rural ministry?
- How does your work interact with inherited or parish-based churches?
- What does a “healthy ecosystem” of church life look like in your area?

Section 5: Learning, Wisdom, and Voice *(Research Aim 3)*

What insights from your experience should shape future strategy, policy, or investment?

Prompt questions, if needed:

- What do you wish denominational leaders, funders, or church planters understood better about rural contexts?
- What forms of support have been most helpful – and what has been missing?
- What advice would you give to someone discerning rural pioneering ministry today?

Section 6: Reflection and Meaning-Making

Looking ahead, what gives you hope for the future of church in rural contexts?

Prompt questions, if needed:

- What has surprised you most about this journey?
- How has this work shaped your faith, leadership, or sense of vocation?

Final catch-all question

Given that the ultimate goal of this research is to help people who are thinking about starting new churches in rural areas or supporting those who are doing this, is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think would be helpful for me to hear?

Partners

This research was made possible thanks to the generous support and resources of the following organisations:

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