

Presence

Papers 2

*The Pulse-Rate of Presence
Your Church's "Health" Checklist*

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

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

Ten check points to review your church's profile of presence in the community:

Rural communities come in all shapes and sizes including market towns, hamlets and isolated farmsteads and there is no single formula that fits all situations. We need to remember that small can be beautiful and that a B-road is not a failed motorway. The economy of God's Kingdom has a special place for small groups! The following areas of exploration are meant to be used flexibly so that your local policy can be shaped and sharpened.



1. Façade

Does your church's 'face' look welcomingly open or closed?

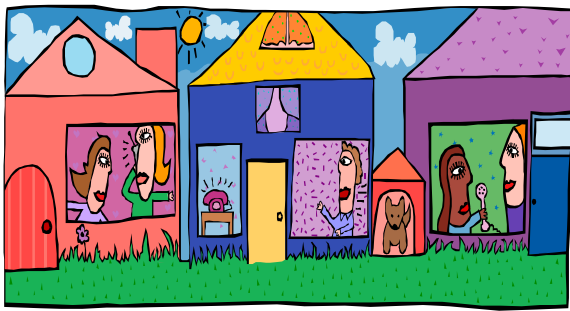
If a stranger were driving past your church, would it be noticed at all? What would the initial impression be? Would there be signs of neglect or of loving care? Does it look a dead frontage or somehow alive? Is the main notice board bold and uncluttered and at a 45 to 80 degree angle to the road so that motorists can read it at a glance? Apart from naming the Church the only wording needs to be: SERVICE HERE EVERY SUNDAY AT 9.30 am ALL WELCOME. (Good example: Duddon Parish Church, Cheshire). Another board can carry the name of the Church, a contact telephone number/website unless these are included on the main board, leaving plenty of space to read the main welcome and time legend. Are the hedges trimmed? Are there colourful bedding plants or hanging baskets? Does the front door sometimes stand ajar (while a steward is present for security) or does the door have a glass panel to glimpse the interior of the church? Are the notices re local events (not all 'churchy') up to date and representing a community involvement and awareness?



2. Welcome

How well do you 'smile people in'?

In many rural settings newcomers know that if they have attended Church in the morning, it will be known around the village by lunch time! The welcome given them needs to be friendly but not too fussy to overcome this potential embarrassment. 'Smiling people in' is an important ministry to reassure newcomers that they are truly welcome and the village is not huddling together with 'its own'. The timing of services needs to be thoughtfully considered and agreed to fit in with local bus services - if there are any(!) - the routines of agricultural life and 21st century pressures on family living. A regular time is more likely to attract people than perpetual changes on a rota with other churches - though sometimes these are necessary and need to be made known in holiday cottages and public places through attractive leaflets. A key mark of a welcoming church is the way people linger to talk or drink coffee after a service and include newcomers rather than staying in familiar closed circles. The imaginative use of festival seasons to involve local people helps to keep the church on the map of local consciousness. The rhythm of the liturgical year is also to be respected and explored (including Plough Sunday, Farm Sunday and Rogationtide). Some churches provide a welcome pack that is delivered to newcomers telling them of local 'services' of all kinds.



3. Participation

How does your church help to bring the community together?

The church community is not sidelined as a 'people apart' if it participates in local interests and events - entering a float in the carnival procession, providing members on the village cricket team, sharing in the best kept village competition or serving on the allotments committee (with a Gardeners' Question Time in the Church or exhibits at the Harvest Festival).

Carols in the local pub also provide a bridge. Taking part in the life of local schools through Assemblies, PTA's, helping at sports days and with special projects maintains a vital link with the younger sector of the community. Some of the Church members need to be covered by safeguarding police checks to be available for this involvement with young people both inside and beyond the usual church family even though there may not be a regular 'Sunday School'. Is your church a 'social bridge' helping to integrate the community?



4. Voice

How does your church help to give a 'voice' to the village?

While the Church will sometimes want to speak with a distinctive voice on local issues, most of the time it is possible, through friendly alliance, to co-operate with local interest groups and the Parish Council in pressing for better conditions. The Church can even give a lead by helping to discover what local needs really are (through a questionnaire and coffee time chats in the village hall). The Church with limited numbers cannot give the impression that it can alone respond to all perceived needs but can co-operate with others to respond to some urgent needs and be able to offer some help through its premises and volunteers. The Church should be fully involved in the drawing up of the 'Parish Plan'. Parish Councillors can be invited to address the Church - they may already be Church members. Does your Church contribute to a local paper/magazine through the religious column or write in about local concerns? Does your Christian community collaborate with others to produce and maintain a community publication with general distribution? Any such publication needs to be well produced and show a lively inter-active face.



5. Ecumenism

What clear signal of local unity is your church giving?

Where a church is the only place of worship in a village or rural area it has a special ecumenical role to play by welcoming and serving people of various denominational backgrounds. A special code of ecumenical hospitality applies (see your area ecumenical officer for details). This is a special privilege and opportunity - to be THE church for all in that place and can liberate the local church from wearing denominational blinkers. Confidence needs to be fostered in some Methodist congregations to fulfil these roles - either as the only place of worship (learning to be THE Church) or as a partner - discarding Free Church feelings of 'inferiority'. Where churches of different traditions serve villages, their credibility and joint survival depends upon imaginative co-operation and sharing of tasks so that there is more coverage of need and scarce resources are not squandered. This can be signalled on the notice boards: 'Dale Methodist Church serving you as part of Longdale Churches Together'.



6. Flexibility

How flexible is your building for public occasions and needs?

Often a church building is the only place suitable for public meetings in a scattered rural area. If the space available can be opened up (e.g. by the use of chairs rather than fixed pews, 2004 disability compliance and kitchen/toilets that meet health and safety regulations) it may be possible for a variety of local gatherings to use the church or hall and so identify with the church as a focus of local community life. This signifies the church's openness and involvement rather than exclusive attitudes which counteract mission. Some churches are being used as community Post Offices, nursery schools, basic shops, farmers' markets or

drop-in centres. Community partnership is the keynote, building on Jesus' maxim, 'Whoever is not against us is for us'. Is your church open more than one hour on a Sunday for community purposes?



7. Prayer

Is your church perceived as a local prayer centre?

Many who do not come to church and resist organised religion still have an interest in prayer and spirituality. Many churches with a board for prayer requests at the back of the church or a post box outside find the option well used. This enables the congregation to pray for a wider constituency - especially when people know that prayer requests can be passed on or handed in to a known point or person. Anonymity needs to be respected to prevent any local gossip. Where the church is known as a 'prayer centre', community awareness of its relevance opens up. Systems of pastoral care through area wardens or church visitors is also a healthy part of this alertness to need - although we need to recognise that

spontaneous and informal care will always be more effective and prominent in the countryside. Some areas are far more socially aware than others that preserve a more isolated and protected way of life. How alert and responsive to local need is your church? Remember the passing trade. Jim Cotter says that in every tourist there is a pilgrim waiting to be recognised!

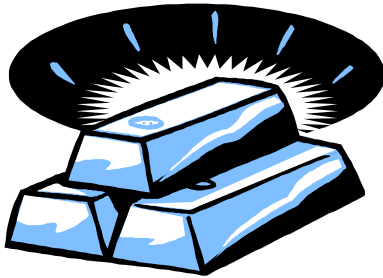


8. Peace

Are you providing a haven of peace?

People often see the rural church as a place for peace and reflection in a madly racing world of change. The local church can offer this through a weekly time for prayer when someone is in the church and it is open for people to call in to pray or reflect, by making leaflets available at the back of the church to help people pray or placing a seat in a corner of the graveyard to provide for those who want to sit and remember (Crowe Hill Methodist Church in the New Forest near Ringwood, Hampshire, is a good example of this). Planting a Quiet Garden on the Church plot is another helpful provision. (Willaston Methodist Church near Nantwich, Cheshire has such a garden). Are you helping people to escape noise pollution and enjoy an oasis? The premises might be used as a retreat centre for town

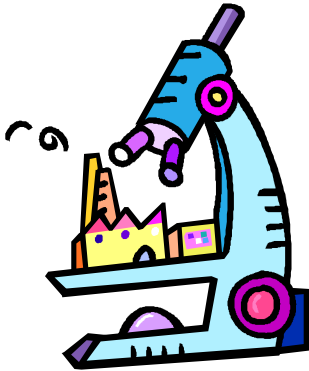
based churches to enjoy a Quiet Day. Low key tourism can be encouraged (Cf. www.hidden-britain.co.uk). An excellent example of this is Hollinsclough in the Peak District where an old farm building opposite the Church has been converted to offer hospitality to walking groups. Llandecwyn in Wales is another such example (cf. story in Country Way via www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk).



9. Assets

Have you maximised your assets?

Most churches have some assets to develop - often overlooked or taken for granted. Crendall Methodist Church (Wimborne Circuit) overlooks and owns a fine village green which it uses for band concerts combined with evening picnics/BBQ's and hoe-downs, attended by people from a wide catchment area and visiting coach parties. Hymn sings are included in a way that keeps the Church on the spiritual map. Summer cream teas are also served to coach parties. Other local assets could be: proximity to a recreation ground to provide refreshments at sports days; near a canal to provide services and light snacks for holidaymakers on the barges (a sign on the canal bank is a good idea); on a tourist route to act as a stop-off place for people exploring the district?



10. Audit

Are you keeping planned developments under regular review?

A Church engaged in any of these processes needs to pause once a year to answer the question: What have we done in the past year to improve the local community scene? In traditional terms this is about John Wesley's quest for 'social holiness' (wholeness). In all this we need to ensure that our first commitment is worship as a faith community and to know that we live by God's kindness and not by ticking boxes - useful though it is. Without such loving kindness the Church is but an empty shell, however well presented!

John D Walker

A COUNTRY PRAYER

God of the quiet places - make us peaceful too
God of the spacious places - free our open view
God of the greening places - keep us fresh, renew
God of the needing places - may our love be true.

Essential reading:

PRESENCE - A workbook to help promote and sustain effective Christian presence in villages

SEEDS IN HOLY GROUND - A workbook published by ACORA,
(obtainable from the Arthur Rank Centre at the address below)

COUNTRY WAY - a quarterly magazine full of good things produced by ARC

Contact: The Arthur Rank Centre
Stoneleigh Park
Warwickshire
CV8 2LZ

[or contact jillh@rase.org.uk]

How well does your church score? 8 out of 10 maybe?

	Answer the following questions and tick those which you do well	√
1	Does your church's face look welcomingly open or closed?	
2	How well do you 'smile people in'?	
3	How does your church help to bring the community together?	
4	How does your church help to give a 'voice' to the village?	
5	What clear signal of local unity is your church giving?	
6	How flexible is your building for public occasions and needs?	
7	Is your church perceived as a local prayer centre?	
8	Are you providing a haven of peace?	
9	Have you maximised your assets?	
10	Are you keeping planned developments under regular review?	
	Your score	