**RURAL STRAND**

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**Towards New Pastoral Structures for the Rural Church**

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# Document Control

## Document Purpose

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## Contact Details

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# Summary

The purpose of this paper is to give guidance to the Bishop’s Staff team and the Guiding Coalition of the Rural Strand around the adjustment and transformation of pastoral structures in the rural parts of the diocese. The rural strand has been charged to re-imagine the rural church through the establishing new patterns of collaborative ministry within rural multi-parish benefices which will be enabled by simplified structures, new teams and the identification of fresh patterns and models of ministry.

Our overall goal is to simplify pastoral structures in a way that releases energy and human resources to engage in the growth of the church.

We will achieve this in five ways:

1) By learning from a series of case studies. These will provide invaluable evidence about what is really happening, the context in which it is taking place as well as what works and why it works. In addition to the case studies we have already begun a limited number of pilot studies, which are, in turn, informed by previous learning

2) By the introduction of Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams which will provide a further catalyst for a transformed structure of rural ministry through new patterns of collaborate working.

3) By the introduction of other collaborative ministry models such as Focal Minister/Leaders, Bishop’s Mission Orders (a special measure that enables fresh expressions of church collaboration to flourish between or across parish boundaries) and Pioneer Ministers .

4) Through developing new working structures better adapted to support and enable both the work of such teams and also the learning gained through the case studies. These may include:

* two parishes forming one joint PCC yet retaining separate identities;
* new benefice structures;
* new multi-church parishes;
* Innovative new arrangements, some of which will develop organically from local, distinctively rural church life.

5) Through a new and strategic approach to rural church buildings in formed by the ‘Rural Churches for Everyone’ project.

‘Form follows function’ or in other words, structures are secondary in that they are not to determine what we do but support what we wish to do.

Finally, we note that that any introduction of new structures at a parochial level in the rural church may in turn require us to re-assess the function and form of the ecclesial structures to which they relate: deaneries, archdeaconries, partnerships and synodical government.  Likewise, the way in which ecclesial structures relate to those of the secular world (parish and county councils, schools and so on) invites further exploration.

**3 BACKGROUND**

## 3.1 Context

The rural church in the diocese of Newcastle – all of rural Northumberland and small parts of Cumbria and County Durham – faces a significant challenge from its geography and its relatively small dispersed population. This challenge is compounded by others: the continuing necessary reduction of the availability of stipendiary clergy; the financial difficulty being faced by the reduction in numbers giving regularly; and by an aging demographic in the more remote areas of the diocese which is leading to a lower capacity amongst laity for participation in the church than has been experienced in recent decades.

In some places such challenges are being experienced painfully and there is a growing honesty around a dawning realisation that the rural church has too many PCCs sustaining too few peoples’ involvement in the rural church and parish and benefice structures that are potentially not sustainable. The establishment of new pastoral structures within the rural church will better support the realisation of the diocesan vision *Growing Church Bringing Hope*  and we believe will enable the rural church to embrace a different and positive future.

**The Rural Strand of the diocesan vision aims to re-imagine rural ministry, particularly to create Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams with new pastoral structures. These need to be responsive to local need, making use of a variety of models and kinds of ministers and workers as appropriate, and be resilient, enabling a sustainable, positive church presence in every rural community. In order to assess the impact of these interventions within a given change arena, a monitoring and evaluation process is required.**

**Key goals for the strategy are that in five years’ time the rural church will be:**

* **Worshipping locally and with openness to new patterns of worship, new styles of worship and fresh types of congregation;**
* **Confident and engaged with developing the church’s life and mission. This will include training for lay and ordained, the development of discipleship, the nurture of lay worship leaders and the growth of clergy able to focus on delivering the vision;**
* **Regarded by other institutions, communities and individuals as a significant partner/player in the development of local communities;**
* **Valued – by itself and others – as a sacred space that holds and shares the Christian story and its heritage in Northumbria and beyond;**
* **A church that has embraced a holistic and varied understanding and practice of growth: in numbers of people who value, respect and engage with their parish church; in numbers of those who are positively impacted by the church; and in openness to how church growth might happen.**

**In the autumn of 2020 the diocese of Newcastle will make a bid for a sustainability grant to implement a ‘people plan’ across the twelve deaneries of the diocese. The search for new fit for purpose structures to sustain the rural church will be informed by the ‘people plan’ but will also help shape its implementation.**

## 3.2 Opportunities

As we work together on developing new structures that support a growing church there a range of opportunities to embrace:

* The initiative provided by *Growing Church Bringing Hope* enables a fresh opportunity to develop sustainable, appropriate and imaginative structures for the rural church.
* The learning offered by up to nine case studies along with the introduction of new Ministry and Mission Leadership Teams and other collaborative models of ministry, will provide opportunities to develop structures that truly meet these criteria.
* The organic change in rural ministerial structures, already apparent in many parts of the diocese, will be better informed and shaped by this process and in turn will help ensure that any new structures are best matched to the specific needs of the rural context. They offer a fluid framework to name and give identity to pastoral groupings as reorganisation emerges from the life of the parishes.
* As we also recognise that it is God alone who gives growth to the church, we have an opportunity though our calling and discipleship to collaborate with God’s prior action and will.
* There is an opportunity to explore how a ministry-led approach to structural change in the rural church will both enable new patterns to emerge and to contrast with situations where in the past we have allowed structural changes to dominate.
* Finally, there is also an opportunity to enable parishes and benefices to reflect more deeply on their identity and how that is expressed in visible structures. Although there will always be an understandable reluctance to change parish or even deanery boundaries, reduce the number of churchwardens or ‘share a vicar’ with a neighbouring parish or benefice, our goal will be to find supplementary ways both to support local identity and to facilitate significant change.
* Another way of expressing this last point is that structures capture what is bubbling up from below and enabling the rural church to have a ‘fleetness of foot’ in responding to new initiatives,

## 3.3 Challenges/threats

In seeking to realise these opportunities we recognise that there are some challenges before us and even threats that might mean we don’t achieve our goals:

* As we recognise that it is God alone who gives true growth to the church, we must recognise that in some places God may be calling us into a future which may be radically different from that we have previously envisaged or imagined. Our plans may be limited by our lack of imagination and vision or even a lack of knowledge of what is possible.
* The reality of decline in the Church of England is inescapable – we need to face up to this fact with honesty, integrity, hope and faith. Equally, there are things going well in the rural church that we have failed to see because we have not been looking through the right lenses. We need to learn how to balance a description of a reality that can be challenging and a hope for new things which is also rooted in reality.
* There is a challenging demographic in some geographical parts of the rural church with many people living longer, staying in their houses longer and with low rates of local house building this is contributing to population decline as fewer families are able to move in. The impact of this demographic is a decline in human resources available to lead and staff all voluntary and community sector organisations including the church. The challenge is to develop structures that are simpler and less onerous that can be inhabited by this new demographic profile.
* We need courage to take risks, but the nature of the church as a human institution is often risk averse and does not allow the freer fluid framework we need to name and give identity to pastoral groupings as reorganisation emerges from the life of the parishes.
* Governance by its very nature, especially within such a human organisation as the church, typically involves burdens and does not free up the energy we hope and pray for.
* We are aware that there is no straightforward correlation between simplification of structures and church growth. The factors that facilitate church growth may sometimes be complex.

# OBJECTIVES

The overall goal is to simplify and transform pastoral structures in a way that releases energy and human resources to engage in the growth of the rural church in the rural parts of the diocese. Our objectives to achieve this aim are:

* To learn from the case studies about both goals and processes to achieve pastoral and structural change;
* To inculcate a culture in the emerging rural church whereby ‘form follows function’ and therefore that engagement with structures is seen to be a secondary not a primary action for change;
* To ensure that thinking about future structures is built in to the establishment of Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams and other collaborative models of ministry so that any simplification of structures is seen as an essential outcome of new patterns of collaboration.
* To identify new models of ministry including the lead/focal ministers and to explore how these leaders relate most appropriately to the structures that are emerging;
* To reflect on the relationship between the growth of new patterns of ministry and the implementation of new structures and to identify theological and practical principles what will enable the transfer of good practice.
* To support the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee and Deanery Development groups with their planning for new rural pastoral structures as they implement the rural strand of the diocesan strategy *Growing Church Bringing Hope*;
* To enable the rural church to answer the question, ‘what makes a good structure’ in terms of the flourishing of the local church?

# Outcomes

A variety of new forms of local church structure will include:

* New structures in which the benefits for the church at every level are clearly articulated
* Two or more parishes forming one joint PCC yet retaining separate identities (available from January 2020)
* New multi-parish benefices covering wider areas than we do at present
* New multi-church parishes
* Fewer parishes, churchwardens and PCCs that enable more efficient decision making in the rural church and release new energy
* Bishop’s Mission Orders that enable new patters of mission and ministry to emerge and be supported
* Parishes or benefices working with each other through Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams without in the short term engaging with structural change
* Innovative new arrangements that emerge from learning gained through the case studies and the experience of working with new Mission and Ministry Teams and the other collaborative models.
* More ministers focusing on one parish/church only.

# Description

The starting place for a theological discussion on new and ‘fit for purpose’ structures in the rural setting is God’s work in the world and in the church to which we are called to respond and through our response help shape the church. This is the theology of the early church that runs throughout the Acts of Apostles. The church as it spreads from Jerusalem, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth is always catching up with the Holy Spirit’s work breaking open opportunities for growth and development. Things happen that the church is not in control of, but it has to wrestle with and reflect on them. God’s acts and how we respond to them shape both the corporate life of the church and of individual discipleship, as is so clearly reflected in our experience of baptism and eucharist.

Structures in the early church grew out of the movement of God’s Spirit. Structure, or as we might say today, ‘order’ was needed to ensure that the church did not neglect some of its basic tasks through over-enthusiasm; for example the creation of the deaconate early on in the Acts of the Apostles to ensure that widows were supported. At a deep level order is necessary because otherwise the risk is that God’s work appears confused, or is not seen and grasped by those we wish to communicate with. Good order or structure can support the evangelical character of the church.

Conversely we may evolve ‘bad’ or inappropriate structures. Even a poor structure is a burden and can even be oppressive, preventing human beings who inhabit it from growing and flourishing as God intends. In this sense structures can have a sinful quality about them. We see this sometimes in the rural church where a parish or benefice structures does not work well and holds people back from discipleship and ministry by dominating time and effort that could be deployed more creatively to grow the church in numbers, spiritual depth and in local collaboration for the common good.

A good structure therefore can be sacramental in the sense that it helps God’s work of revealing God’s-own self to the world, in both effective action and communication of God’s will. We firmly believe that the new Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams embody one such good structure that will enable us to work across traditional boundaries with new purpose and vision. As they come on stream so it will be necessary to grow other new structures and forms of ministry in their wake, as this document seeks to make clear

Good structures at every level which have built-in flexibility will enable the rural church to ‘keep in step with the Spirit’ as transformation and development occurs. It might even be said that a good structure is a safe container within which the Spirit can work without restraint or false control.

Taking this theological basis into account, there are some practical principles that will ensure that the newly developed pastoral structures will serve the vision for the rural church. These are summarised:

* In terms of future pastoral structures no blueprint is to be imposed on any parish or benefice;
* The primary action will be the setting up of Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams and other collaborative models of ministry, the secondary action will be the discernment of future structures;
* In time the development of good and appropriate structures will help set the parameters for the growth of Mission and Ministry Leadership Teams;
* There will be a contextual approach in which each proposal for change will be specific to each set of parishes or benefices;
* We will seek to do full options appraisals on new pastoral structures and involve fully clergy, PCCs and churchwardens in making a full assessment of the possibilities
* We will ensure that new structures will mean in practical terms for clergy in leadership positions less not more administrative burden and a freeing up for more missional and pastoral work that will lead to growth;
* Where existing structures are combined we will be aiming for a ‘lighter touch’ than we have at present (fewer PCCs, churchwardens, small benefice councils and Team Councils);
* Learning will grow from the case studies enabling us to understand far better the context in which we work and to see what works and why it works.
* Priority is to be given to the local situation (parish, benefice and deanery) in the discernment of new structures and the Church of England’s rules and frameworks are to be seen as enable and responding, not determining.

Risks/Dependencies/Assumptions

## Key Risks

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Importance** | **Mitigation** | **Owner** |
|  | Low/Med/High |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

## Key Dependencies

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Dependency Description** | **Importance** | **Mitigation** |
|  | Low/Med/High |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

## Key Assumptions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Assumption Description** | **Importance** | **Mitigation** |
|  | Low/Med/High |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

# Resources

<what are the key resources required to deliver this strategy

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stakeholder** | **Interest** | **Influence** | **Engagement Strategy** |
| Name | LOW/MED/HIGH | LOW/MED/HIGH | How to engage and communicate with |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |