



# CHRISTIAN UNITY IN THE VILLAGE

ANTHONY RUSSELL

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# INTRODUCTION

The words 'rural' and 'ecumenism' are both problematic words. This short study is the product of two meetings of those who know the rural scene well, sponsored by the Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects in England (CCLEPE) and the Board for Mission and Unity, held at the Arthur Rank Centre, National Agricultural Centre in 1985. It is intended that it be read in conjunction with "Local Church Unity: Guidelines for Local Ecumenical Projects and Sponsoring Bodies" (BCC: 1985).

The last five years has seen a remarkable resurgence in interest in rural ministry. Ten years ago the countryside was regarded as the generality of the church's ministry, on the margins of the urban areas, where the main thrust of the church's work was concentrated. Today, for a number of reasons, it is widely appreciated that the problems of the church in the countryside are, in their own way, as acute as those in inner city areas, and that people living in the countryside suffer from high levels of deprivation, though it may be of a different type and extent to that found in urban priority areas.

This publication seeks to record the views and experience of those who took part in the two consultations. As the author, I have tried to reproduce the experience of those two occasions, together with a range of examples of contemporary practice. There is a sense in which this publication is born out of crisis and it is hoped that what it contains will encourage others to more adventurous experiments in ecumenism in the countryside.

***Anthony Russell,  
Director, Arthur Rank Centre.***

# Chapter I

## WHAT IS RURAL?

In contemporary English society it is increasingly difficult to define what is rural and at many levels the similarity between urban and rural life styles are more obvious than the differences. However, rural settlements are different in their social profile and dynamics from urban areas and this is of particular significance for the church. Not least because it is in the church where many historic understandings about the rural community linger.

The definition of what is rural in English society is varied and complex. At the physical level it is not easy to distinguish between urban and rural areas, and most analysts write of a continuum between extreme rural and extreme urban. Such a continuum leaves the majority of England in a middle category. Some social geographers have developed indices of rurality, and planners and administrators (since the demise of the Rural District Councils) have found it necessary to devise arbitrary delineations between urban and rural. Estimates of the size of the contemporary rural population vary considerably; various yardsticks have been used based on the degree of remoteness from urban centres; the density of the population and the size of the settlement. However, for the purposes of this study the rural population may be defined as those who live in market towns and villages up to ten thousand of which there are approximately thirteen thousand such settlements in England or Wales, though this study is not concerned with Wales, in which very nearly 20% of the population lives. Of these settlements, nine thousand have a population of less than one thousand and 80% have no more than five hundred people.

Just as it is misleading to speak of the city centre as if it were a monochrome phenomenon, so it is misleading to speak of the countryside as if the social situation of rural areas was the same

everywhere. It is possible to distinguish between four principal 'countrysides' in contemporary England.

The urban shadow countryside can be found in the immediate vicinity of urban areas. In this countryside, commuters tend to be predominant, and the villagers often have the feel of a discontinuous suburb. The farming community, though present, is not particularly evident and because of the proximity of an urban centre, the facilities and services in the village are often minimal.

The accessible countryside frequently has better facilities as the urban centre is at a greater distance. Commuters and the retired live in considerable numbers in these villages, but the farming community and the local resident group are far more evident. Communications to the nearest metropolitan centres, either by road or rail, are good.

The less accessible countryside, sometimes defined as that area beyond the travelling distance of one hour from the metropolitan centre, is characterized in some areas by depopulation. Commuters are markedly less evident though there are a significant number of retired people in such villages. The farming community and local resident community is much more evident than in the previous two types and services and facilities are seriously affected by the spiral of decline in village life.

In the remote or more marginal countryside the local resident community and the farmers form the majority of the year round population, although there are some retired people. Second homes and occasional holiday residents play an important role in many areas. Services and facilities in the remoter countryside have been seriously contracted in recent decades. Before any assessment can be made of the church's situation in rural areas, or indeed of its ecumenical involvement, it is necessary to discover which type of countryside is being spoken of.

## Chapter II

### WHAT IS THE RURAL CHURCH?

The rural church is distinctive and different from the suburban or urban church on account of its different scale, history, context and internal dynamics.

It is outside the confines of this chapter to discuss in any detail the origins of English denominationalism. However, one of the principal factors in any discussion of rural ecumenism is the dominance of the Church of England in the countryside. Historically the rural areas have been the heartland of the Church of England and although accurate statistics are not available, various sources quote that the church of England has an 80% superiority of church buildings and ministers in most rural areas, though probably not of church members.

In the post-Reformation period it was said that the number of Catholic churches increased with the distance from London. Certainly, it is still the case that there are proportionally more Catholic Churches in the remoter countryside, particularly Norfolk and Northumberland, than there are in some of the more accessible rural areas, though even this situation has changed recently. On the whole the Roman Catholic Church has not seen itself as a rural church in England, in contrast to many other countries, though there are exceptions to this such as in Lancashire.

By the same token the Baptist Church, though strong in some rural areas such as Bedfordshire and the Eastern Counties, has again seen itself principally as a central church to which people travel. An example is provided by the Baptist Church in Banbury which draws congregation members from south Warwickshire, north Oxfordshire and south Northamptonshire. The United Reformed Church is strong in certain areas, particularly in Northumberland, though again has not seen itself as a predominantly rural church.



In contrast, the Methodist Church has always had a sizable presence in rural areas, particularly in Cornwall, where for generations it was numerically the largest church and may still be so, and north Norfolk. It is probably true to say that Methodism alone with the Church of England are the only churches that have a national network of rural churches.

By contrast with urban ecumenism, where all denominations are likely to be represented in a sizable town or city centre; in the countryside this is unlikely to be the situation although individual church members may well be there. Whilst the Church of England is ubiquitous other denominations are either thinly scattered or else present in only certain localities.

## History

The nineteenth century history of the English village is of particular importance in considering contemporary rural ecumenism. In the nineteenth century the Church of England became closely associated with the dominant authority structures in rural life. As in the previous century the squire was likely to be the patron of the living and in many villages the church was supported by the principal farmers and land owners. The vestry, as both a church meeting and the only vehicle of local government and which fixed the local rates, witnessed to the intermingling of secular and religious understandings in church life. For many the nineteenth century village was found to be claustrophobic and authoritarian and they escaped to the colonies, to the cities or the armed forces as quickly as they could. Those who remained tended to form areas of social activity which were insulated from the predominant authority structure; of these the two most obvious, though totally different in character, were the chapel and the public house. For many the chapel became a symbol of local dignity and pride and a protected area in which the influence of the authority structure of the village did not permeate. Such chapels and congregations were 'independent' in the full sense of the term. Inevitably they came to represent divisions in Victorian society which were not at heart religious but were in essence the divisions between the land owners, professionals and larger farmers, and the farm workers and small shopkeepers who identified more readily with the

Methodists and other chapels. This historic division between church and chapel in rural society is the same division as that between employer and employee, or what Hobsbown and Rude called “the official village” and “the dark village”.

It can be argued that all the reasons and social causes which originated and perpetuated the division between church and chapel in the village and made it such a prominent feature of Victorian life, have now disappeared. It can also be argued that the church alone perpetuates and maintains these divisions.

## **Context**

It must be recognised that the social context of churches in rural areas differs from churches in other places. However small their membership churches still retain a type of relationship with the wider community in a village, which is not true of churches in an inner city or suburban area. Historically this has been quintessentially an Anglican role to represent and provide a focus of community within a village. However, there is a sense in which many Methodists and other churches have fulfilled the same function particularly in certain areas. However, there is a marked distinction between churches which have a community orientation and churches which have a more gathered orientation. Two churches may both be rural but they may not be both similar phenomena. In large towns, churches often set out to create an alternative church community with church clubs and activities; in most villages the situation is that of one society permeated by Christian influences.

## **Internal dynamics**

In America it is common to talk about ‘small churches’ and thus include both small inner city and small rural churches in the same category. It is increasingly recognised that small churches have different characteristics to large churches. For instance, the nature of leadership in small churches is inevitably different; such churches often have minimum ministerial time available to them and local lay leadership plays a much more significant role. Within this context it is easy for certain families, or a cluster of

families, to occupy a very central position. At the same time, because such churches are inevitably 'small member churches', and it must be remembered that most churches in Britain fall into this category, problems of maintenance and survival loom much larger than they do for other churches. There is a sense in which people are dominated by a feeling of keeping faith with the past; that this church must not die in their generation whatever happens. In this context ecumenism can often be seen as a much greater threat than it is in urban areas; particularly to non-Anglican churches which sense that in a situation where there are two buildings, one of which may eventually have to be disposed of, it is unlikely that the ancient Anglican church will be the one to close.

## Chapter III

### WHAT IS RURAL ECUMENISM?

Until relatively recently the relations between different denominations in the countryside were more characteristically marked by some degree of suspicion and hostility than by any degree of co-operation. It is easy to over emphasise this point and in many parishes towards the latter part of the last century it was common for people to attend both the parish church and the Methodist or Baptist chapel; often attending the parish church in the morning and the chapel in the evening. Certainly, in the decades of this century, as Christians in the village came to recognise themselves as a minority group, so it was common for joint ventures to be established and for there to be regular exchanges of hospitality between two congregations; both attending each others Harvest Festivals, Sunday school, anniversaries, Christmas Carol services etc.

In recent years there has been a much wider recognition of the scandal of denominationalism and the fact that the maintenance of different denominational churches in small villages is not just practically impossible but also theologically wrong, whatever the context. At the same time the barriers that once divided denominations have been gradually perceived to be of less significance than was at one time thought, and thus a new atmosphere of ecumenical co-operation has grown up in many areas.

At the same time the increasing cost of maintaining both the ministry and the many church buildings in rural areas has disposed the churches towards rationalization. It is not uncommon for a Anglican clergyman criss-crossing his group of eight to ten country parishes to lead worship in five or six churches on a Sunday, to wave to his Methodist colleague on more than one occasion as he fulfills a similar programme over an even wider area. The recognition of such a situation argues for a rationalization of ministry. At the same time the cost of

maintaining buildings and the burden this places on small congregations has also accelerated the process of ecumenical co-operation in many rural areas. Increasingly small congregations in the same village co-operate by using the larger parish church during the summer months and the smaller, more easily heated chapel during the winter months. Many Victorian churches and chapels are now reaching the state in their lives where they need major repair, and at times rebuilding. Serious thought has to be given to the expenditure of large sums.

The next chapter contains a number of examples of contemporary ecumenical co-operation in the countryside.

## Chapter IV

### CASE STUDIES

#### **Dry Rot Ecumenism at Belthorn**

The bleak and windswept moorland village of Belthorn has one hundred and forty houses and not long ago had two small congregations, one worshipping in St. Michael's Parish Church and the other in the United Reformed Church Chapel. When dry rot was detected in the parish church it had to be closed and a Sharing Agreement was made between its former congregation and the members of the United Reformed Church chapel. Whilst this arrangement existed the Church of England worship took place during the morning and the United Reformed Church had its customary service in the afternoon.

However, in 1982 it was found that the United Reformed Church chapel was itself unsafe and during a period of uncertainty the Anglican congregation disbanded and the URC, worshipping in the primary school, dwindled to three.

In the spring of 1984, the non-resident URC minister took the initiative to visit each home and to discover whether people were concerned that church life in the village appeared to be coming rapidly to an end. Of the twelve URC members ten were over sixty years of age. The result of his visiting was immediate and encouraging; a new ecumenical congregation started to worship fortnightly, with either the Rural Dean or the URC minister leading worship on one Sunday and the congregation leading their worship on the next occasion. At the same time a project to turn a disused building in the village into a community centre was revitalized and given a new impetus. The restoration was completed and the centre opened in early 1985.

The arrival of a new vicar responsible for the parish, though non-resident, further strengthened this new congregation which is a symbol of not only a revitalized Christian presence but also of new community spirit in a small village. As it grows in

confidence it is hoped that it may develop, with the aid of the Lancashire Ecumenical Sponsoring Body, into a fully fledged local ecumenical project. The URC minister, whose initial visiting provided the turning point in this story, clearly articulated local need. He attributes all that has been achieved to constant prayer and a people willing to help themselves.

## **Pilning**

A few miles north of Bristol near the Severn Estuary lies the village of Pilning with a population of approximately one thousand people. In the village ecumenical co-operation grew in a conventional way. At first there were occasional united services, then a shared family service once a month and a Methodist page in the Anglican parish magazine. In 1969 the Parochial Church Council and the leaders of the Methodist Church began to meet together regularly and out of the discussions grew a Parish Warden Scheme.

During the meetings it became clear that members of both congregations, who knew each other relatively well, did practically everything with the village together. In village hall activities, the annual music week, the meals on wheels service, there was no distinction between Methodists and Anglicans; it was only in worship that the distinction became apparent. Eventually a plan was developed to move a step forward to overcoming these barriers. It was proposed that all worship should take place in the parish church; that the chapel should be converted into a community building suitable for weekday activities and the Sunday school, and that the church hall should be sold to finance these alterations. It was remarkable that such a radical departure from the past was agreed by both congregations and this was only achieved because the Methodists were willing to abandon their 'defensive' position and the Anglicans, who were numerically much the more dominant partner, were prepared to be understanding and generous in matters of money and the allocation of worship times. In fact, from the onset, services were approximately half Anglican and half Methodist rather than related to the exact ratio of church members.

It is now thirteen years since the Local Ecumenical Project was initiated and the new situation in Pilning is no longer a novelty but part of the accepted way of things. A generation of young people, who regard themselves simply as members of the church rather than as Anglicans or Methodists, has now grown up within the church. It causes them a good deal of frustration and disappointment that when they add their names to the church voting roll, this has to be done either on the Anglican Electoral Roll or the Methodist Membership Roll. Such a church has gone as far down the ecumenical road as is currently allowed, but still experiences the pain of having to retain dual membership rolls and dual forms of worship.

### **Ecumenism in Rural Shropshire**

In a small area in rural Shropshire there are two Anglican churches, five Methodist chapels from two circuits, and a United Reformed Church, none of which had a resident clergyman although Anglican, Methodist and URC clergy from outside spent time in the area. It was clear to all, not least the denominational leaders, that this was an unsatisfactory situation with a large number of relatively small churches served by ministers who lived some distance away.

A meeting was called which included the Anglican Bishop, the Methodist Chairman, and the URC Moderator, to consider what action should be taken. It was accepted that at least for the immediate future there was no possibility of forming a joint church but that a minister should be found who could serve the needs of all the congregation in that area and become a focus for joint Christian activity.

Eventually an Anglican clergyman was appointed and took up residence in the area to be Christian pastor to Anglicans and all others in the community. He developed close links with the Methodist and URC ministers responsible for small congregations in the area, and whilst the traditions of the three denominations were maintained, he became the centre and driving force for inter-church work based in that locality. Whilst no formal scheme or arrangement has been developed, the



appointment of a single Minister with the ability and sensitivity to work with all congregations has greatly strengthened the churches presence there.

### **Wilton, Wiltshire**

In the late 1960s the Methodist and Congregational congregations in the small town of Wilton, near Salisbury, decided to join together as a single congregation. Of the two churches, the Congregational Chapel was regarded as the more appropriate and the new joint congregation was established in this chapel. The now redundant Methodist Chapel was sold to the Roman Catholic congregation who had no church building of their own in Wilton.

The new joint Methodist-Congregational church developed and grew but, in 1981, discovered that their premises were unsafe. Thus they had to move out and when their predicament was known were invited by the Roman Catholic congregation to share what was the original Methodist Chapel. With the agreement of the three denominations, a project of redevelopment was initiated which received financial backing from all the three denominations. Thus a full sharing agreement was attained and the Methodists and United Reformed Church (which the Congregational Church had now become) established a team ministry which extended from Wilton into the Wylye Valley.

Few rural ecumenical occasions can have been more complex than that which took place in 1982, when a woman URC minister was ordained in the former Methodist Chapel in Wilton, now a Roman Catholic Church shared by the United Reformed Church and the Methodists, on the completion of her training at an Anglican theological college.

### **Whixall**

An example of the process by which ecumenical development is

achieved in the countryside is afforded by Whixall. In the immediate area of Whixall there are two Anglican churches, five Methodist chapels and one United Reformed Church chapel. As in many rural situations there are no resident clergy, but one Anglican priest, two methodist ministers and one URC minister all spend time in this area.

In order to address the problems of the church here, it was decided to call a day conference of representatives of all the churches, not only in Whixall but from the ten surrounding villages. Before the day representatives were asked to read a paper in which a number of different approaches to the problem were discussed and solutions offered. On arrival the representatives were split into different groups, with each group having representatives from different villages; the clergy forming a group of their own. People were free to discuss all kinds of aspects of the problem and possible solutions – these included shared buildings, more lay leadership, more joint projects, such as youth clubs, Sunday schools, bible studies and house groups, etc. When all the groups came together at the end of the day, whilst there were a variety of ideas, everyone was united in the realization that a problem existed and that it was within their power to provide some solutions. As a result a churches committee was established and began to organise joint services on a regular basis, ecumenical house groups, a Christian youth group, joint Sunday school functions, joint Harvest Festival Services and suppers, joint Christmas and Easter celebrations, joint Christian Aid work and a joint fete.

The churches in this area are in the early stage of growing together in an informal way which it is hoped will eventually lead to a local Covenant and thereafter the possibility of more formal ecumenical arrangements. However, the churches Committee realised at an early stage that such a goal could not be achieved immediately, but that it was necessary for churches to grow together and for people to know one another and trust one another before formal ecumenical arrangements can be developed.

## **Hamstreet, Kent.**

The village of Hamstreet is north of Romney and in the parish of Orlestone. The ancient parish church is a mile away from the village whilst the Methodist Church, founded only a century ago, occupies a central site. For a long time the Anglican congregation had realised that the site of its church was an almost insuperable difficulty in developing a thriving congregational life. Various plans had been canvassed to build a new place of worship but recently these were rejected in favour of an agreement to share with the Methodists. As a result, the Methodist Church was substantially and most satisfactorily re-ordered and restored in 1977. It is now legally a 'shared building' used by members of both denominations, sometimes separately but more usually together.

Over the years there has been a steady growing together of the two congregations in worship, witness and ministry. Since 1983 there has been one service each Sunday morning, with united worship led alternatively by Methodists and Anglicans. A 'Welcome to the New Residents' leaflet has been approved and is issued jointly to those who take up residence in the village by the Joint Church Council. At the same time a youth club has been opened and is now run jointly by the Anglicans and Methodists.

The buildings are also used by the Roman Catholic Church for worship once a month. They share in occasional local acts of witness and social concern and send two observers to the Joint Church Council meeting.

## **Burham and Woodham, Kent.**

In the neighbouring villages of Burham and Woodham a few miles from Rochester on the River Medway, there were three churches; in Woodham the Anglican Parish Church of All Saints; in Burham a small Methodist Chapel and a much larger Victorian Anglican Parish Church in a poor state of repair.

The Anglican congregation in Burham decided that it would not be appropriate to attempt the enormous task of repairing the parish church, particularly when there was a chapel in the

village. It was therefore decided that the Anglican Church should be demolished and the congregation should join the Methodists in a 'shared building' arrangement. As a result the chapel was considerably extended and renovated with money provided by both denominations. The new 'shared' church provided the spur to the development of many activities within the village. The next step will be to simplify the decision making structure, which at present consists of a Methodist Council, a Parochial Church Council and a Joint Churches Council and to plan for greater joint involvement in pastoral work and outreach.

### **Berwick St. John, Wiltshire.**

In this remote village in Wiltshire the Baptists have been sharing in the life of the Anglican community for many years as well as keeping their own building open. One Baptist was organist at the parish church, another ran a village Sunday school for both congregations. When the Baptist Church was faced with serious problems in the chapel building which threatened survival, questions had to be faced about whether it was right to invest large sums of money in sustaining two buildings, especially when the two church communities were already interwoven to a considerable degree.

The Rector and Baptist Minister, neither of whom lived in the village, were already co-operating closely and it was a relatively simple matter to conclude an informal arrangement between the two congregations. As a result building work did not proceed on the Baptist chapel which was eventually sold, realising a sum of £50,000 for Christian work in the community. In the parish church, Anglican services are held on two Sundays in the month and Baptist services held on the other two.

### **Oakridge**

The village of Oakridge has a population of six hundred and fifty, comprised of five hamlets, each of which has a strong sense of community and self-reliance. The parish church has a regular

congregation of approximately fifty whilst the Methodist chapel has between twelve and fifteen. Members of both congregations are involved in many aspects of village life.

Six years ago a Joint Churches Committee was formed to co-ordinate the traditional joint services, Harvest Festival and the Carol Service, and to develop new initiatives. Lent talks, a meeting in One World Week, and other occasional meetings, with outside speakers, were organised by the Joint Churches Committee.

This pattern would have probably continued for many years had it not been for the decision to reroof the parish church and to put in a new ceiling which inevitably necessitated closing the church for a number of weeks. The Anglican congregation asked the Methodists if they could join their services during the closure and the Methodists suggested an Anglican Parish Communion for two weeks and the Methodist service for the other two weeks during that month. This joint worship proved so successful that when it was due to end everyone asked for it to continue so a pattern of joint services on the fourth Sunday of each month in alternate churches has been started and the churches are set to grow together in a much more determined fashion.

### **Preston-on-Stour, warwickshire.**

The preceding examples of joint action cite instances in which there was more than one church in a community and the majority of them cite instances in which the deterioration in one of the buildings precipitated moves towards a more ecumenical situation. However in many country villages this is not the situation for there is only one parish church.

In recent years the population of the countryside has changed considerably as people have moved away from the village and commuters, second home owners and the retired have moved in. Retirement migration from urban areas to the countryside is the major demographic phenomenon in our society. Those who come into a village from urban areas do so from a variety of church backgrounds and if that background is non-Anglican they have

to decide whether they will travel to the nearest large village or market town to attend a church of their own denomination or whether they will join in the worship of the parish church.

Some will wish to travel considerable distances to a church of a particular denomination, others will wish to worship in the parish church and by so doing affirm the community in which they have settled. Alan Davies, in a major article in the 1986 Home Mission Division Annual Report, commends this latter practice for Methodists and questions whether those who travel large distances to the major denominational centres should not consider carefully whether they should not be supporting the church in their local community. Clearly, this confers a considerable responsibility on the parish church to develop its worship and community life in such a way that members of other denominations can easily find a home within it.

Preston-on-Stour is a small community church in south Warwickshire, in a village of approximately one hundred and twenty people. Some time ago there was a Baptist Chapel in the village but this has not functioned for over a decade. Members of the congregation, both local and those who have moved into the village more recently, come from every denominational background. Church life is shaped in such a way that all can feel included. Inevitably difficulties occur; but by recognising and accommodating these it is possible for the country church to become genuinely a community church in which members of several denominations feel at home and genuinely part of that congregation. Recent changes in church law have reflected this situation, whereby non-Anglicans have become members of the Parochial Church Council. (Church Representation Rules. 9.1 [1955] and a number of other important changes are likely to become law in 1987).

The essential thing is that all Christians can work and witness together as one community without any feeling of disloyalty to their existing denomination and can continue to remain 'on the books' of the nearest denominational church. Response from the many rural house groups taking part in the Inter-Church Process during Lent 86 indicates that the practice is much more widespread than might have been thought.

# Chapter V

## POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS

When the first Ecumenical projects called 'Areas of Ecumenical Experiment' were set up in the 1960s, each one had its own sponsoring body to oversee and develop the work. As the numbers have grown, now to over five hundred projects, these local bodies have given way to regional bodies usually county or borough sponsoring bodies.

In almost every county now there exists an ecumenical body, sometimes known as the sponsoring body, i.e., the Cornwall Sponsoring body or in other cases known as the Ecumenical Council such as the Derbyshire Ecumenical Council. These not only look after the Local Ecumenical Projects but are also concerned to foster new ones and oversee and advise on ecumenical activity at different levels in the county.

The membership of most sponsoring bodies is made up from church leaders (bishops, chairmen, moderators) who are responsible for that area, as well as their ecumenical officers and other representatives from the denominations. However, it has to be recognised that ecumenical geography, particularly in the countryside, is both complex and frustrating. In practice, denominational boundaries rarely coincide either at the regional or at the local level. At the local level this means that one Methodist minister can easily relate to as many as fifteen to twenty Anglican incumbents. At the regional level it means that there is not as much overlap and consequently 'counties' have, in almost all cases, been chosen as the geographical area of responsibility for the sponsoring bodies.

Some counties, such as Lincolnshire, have a full time ecumenical officer to serve the Sponsoring Body and to represent the church leaders in the county and develop ecumenical matters. Others have a part time official who acts as secretary for the church leaders and the Sponsoring Body and as a resource person for the development of ecumenical affairs in that area.

In an area where a Sponsoring Body has charge of a significant number of local ecumenical projects, the oversight of an area's ecumenical work may be vested in a Local Support Group on which the sponsoring body is represented. The Sponsoring Body's representative represents the human face of official ecumenism and is able at the same time to represent the views of a local area to the church leaders. Most Sponsoring Bodies meet three or four times a year, and if help is required in any particular area they are the first people from whom help should be sought. If you should need an address, do not hesitate to contact the secretary of the Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects in England whose office is at the British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London SW1W 9BL.

However, not all ecumenical activity, particularly in the countryside, must be regarded as 'official' ecumenical projects. Much goes on at the informal level and although this activity is essentially local and informal it is important that the County Sponsoring Body should know of it and that it should be encouraged from the centre.

One of the most complex decisions in all ecumenical matters is judging correctly the moment at which a local informal development should become an official ecumenical project. Getting the right guidance at this point from those who have experience of these matters, is of particular value and somebody from outside the immediate local situation is likely to be of particular assistance at this point.

The problems of ecumenical geography have been mentioned above, but they loom large when decisions are being taken about where clergymen should be posted. As a result of internal denominational pressures, decisions can be taken in isolation from other denominations, as in the case of a large village in the eastern counties which lost all three resident ministers within a twelve month period. With some consultation it should have been possible in this, and many other cases, to have made some pastoral provision for that community in a way which did not involve withdrawing all the ministers at the same time.



## Chapter VI

### THE FUTURE

All denominations appear to have convergent understandings of ministering today, at least at the practical level. In every denomination the significance of lay leadership, the importance of the local church becoming responsible for ministry and life of that community are being stressed. The rural church of the future is likely to be local, indigenous and ecumenical. As in many rural matters informality and locally understood arrangements play an important role in rural ecumenical activities. Much happens in the village of a diocese or a deanery, a circuit or district, county union or provincial synod, which may not be known by the centre. Support is given by one worshipping community to another, special occasions have a habit of becoming regular events. Much of this co-operation, which is so important locally, is only discovered by those from outside by accident.

In many rural communities church and chapel work together, particularly if both have their own building and a degree of autonomy. Relations can become very close if neither group is threatened and they speak of the importance of an informal relationship and of their suspicions of formal commitment, sharing agreements and the like. Such a feeling can often result, as much from a suspicion of their own denominational authorities, as it is reluctance to join with other Christians. Many village churches and chapels are close to paranoiac about their denominational authorities and fear that 'they' will come to shut them down or force them to join three other parishes, or two neighbouring chapels. As a result pressure for a Declaration of Intent or a Sharing Agreement can be highly counter productive and be seen as part of a wider plot, possibly to close down the church.

It is important to point out that informal and sometimes illegal arrangements, important though they are, are dependent upon

denominational authorities turning a blind eye to what is happening and are very dependent upon the co-operation and good will of local incumbents and ministers. A change of clergyman or minister can, and has, killed informal ecumenical development which has been growing steadily over a period of fifteen to twenty years; to the deep distress of those involved. Unofficial arrangements are also at risk from barrack room synodical lawyers or denominational enthusiasts who move into a village. If someone complains to the Bishop or the Superintendent Minister about irregularities, it is often difficult for them to avoid at least appearing to take some action. Recognition by the Sponsoring Body and a sharing agreement are usually enough to make the non-ecumenically minded minister aware that ecumenism is here to stay in that village and that if s/he is unwilling to work with that situation s/he should not accept that appointment. This and many other advantages flow from formal arrangements. However, knowing the right moment to push for a formal ecumenical commitment is a matter of considerable judgement.

## Chapter VII

### WHICH WAY FORWARD

Perhaps in the last resort we may conclude that there is no such thing as rural ecumenism. We are not talking about some extra option or dimension to the life of the church, but rather about the future of the church in rural communities which will be both local, indigenous and ecumenical; by definition less dependent upon centralist understandings and less denominational. Christians in the village, as they are doing in numerous cases, are coming together irrespective of denominational background to form a Christian community at the heart of the village. We are called to be a model of the Kingdom at the heart of the local community; heralding, pointing towards and actualizing the Kingdom in the contemporary countryside. This is the role of all Christians and in many villages they are joining together to see this as a common task. Of course there are enormous problems, many of them caused by an understandably admirable loyalty to the past; but we must never let our respect for the past be so great that it limits our visions for the future. We must recognise that changed circumstances demand new initiatives and new understandings. It is hoped that the examples in this book will provide encouragement for those in the contemporary rural church.

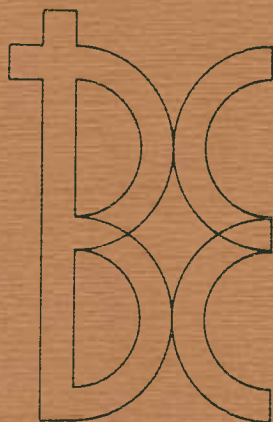
Ultimately rural ecumenism is about the future of the church in the countryside, its ministry and its mission, a future which must be lived in greater obedience to our Lord's prayer 'that they may be one, that the world may believe'.

## APPENDIX

List of participants in the two seminars organised by the British Council of Churches and the Board for Mission and Unity.

Mrs. C. Carver,	Black Ness House, East Cornworthy, Nr. Totnes, South Devon.
The Rev'd Eric Chard,	Downham Vicarage, Clitheroe, Lancs. BB7 4BL.
The Rev'd John Clarke,	Arthur Rank Centre, National Agricultural Centre, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 2LZ.
The Rev'd Michael Jackson,	Ecumenical Commission, 34/40 Eccelstone Square, London. SW1V 1PD.
Mr. F. Crix,	177 Whalley Drive, Bletchley, MK3 6JA.
The Rev'd Hugh Cross,	British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London. SW1W 9BL.
The Rev'd Percy Cullum,	23 Mortimer Road, Buntingsdale Park, Market Drayton, Shropshire. TF9 2EP.
The Rev'd Alan Davies,	52 St. Edwards Drive, Sudbrooke, Lincoln. LN2 2QR.
The Rev'd G. Edwards,	22 Highlands Road, Salisbury, Wilts.
The Rev'd M. Hubbard,	Church House, 3 Elm Grove, Taunton, Somerset. TA1 1EG.
Mrs. Pamela Luke,	Moresk, 22 Treassowe Road, Penzance, Cornwall, TR18 2AU.
Canon Derek Palmer,	Board for Mission and Unity, Church House, Dean's Yard, London. SW1P 3NZ.

Canon Anthony Russell	Arthur Rank Centre, National Agricultural Centre, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 2LZ.
The Rev'd Jesse Sage,	The Rectory, Pluckley, Ashford, Kent, TN27 0QT.
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Mr. John Young,	Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, Glos.



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