

**ADVANCED PROOF EXTRACT**

FOREWORD BY HUGH DENNIS

# HOW VILLAGE CHURCHES THRIVE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

*'this timely and helpful book ... is full  
of practical advice and encouragement.'*

ARCHBISHOP STEPHEN COTTRELL

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# FOREWORD

BY HUGH DENNIS

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**If I am honest, I probably find it as surprising as you do that I have been asked to write the foreword to a book about rural churches. It isn't my normal line of country but let me give you a little context.**

When I did the calculation, I discovered that for nearly half my life I have lived next door to churches of various shapes and sizes.

Admittedly I have no memory of the first one, the Parish Church of Kettering in Northamptonshire, but I feel certain that I must have been inside it, because my father was the curate, and I was born in the Rectory next door. I arrived in great haste apparently, shortly after lunch and masquerading as indigestion, and there was no time to get to the hospital.

Next on my travels was Christ Church, on the Isle of Dogs, in the East End of London, where in 1962 when I was a mere three months old, my father became the rather cool, pipe-smoking vicar.

A decade later, we were off again, to Mill Hill in North London and a parish in which Robert Atwell, the author of the introduction to this book, now Bishop of Exeter, was my father's curate. This was followed by stints in Yorkshire, where my father, now a suffragan Bishop, served in the Diocese of Ripon, and then in Suffolk as Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

Even on holiday we liked to be next door to churches, and most of my summer holidays were spent in rural parishes around England where my father borrowed the vicarage as a base, in return for taking the services while the usual vicar was away.



You might think, quite reasonably, that a childhood of such proximity to churches would mean that I would step away from the habit in adult life, but not a bit of it. Instead, I bought a house next to a small church in the South Downs, one of eight churches in a team parish in the Diocese of Chichester.

In other words, when it comes to churches and parishes, I am something of an insider with a particular love for rural churches, and a great sympathy for those who toil to keep them going in what are often very difficult circumstances.

Stand on the top of any hill in the English Countryside, look down onto the patchwork of trees and fields beneath, and almost certainly somewhere in that landscape you will see the spire or tower of a place of worship, dominating the skyline of the village in which they are set. They are often hundreds of years old, they have seen generation after generation enter through their hefty oak doors and have witnessed innumerable changes to the land that surrounds them, but it is the relatively recent past that has perhaps been most difficult for them, as agriculture has altered, employment opportunities have reduced, and the rural population has drifted to the towns.

Yet it would be folly to make the mistake of thinking that these buildings are simply historic monuments, facing inevitable decline. In my experience, they are often well loved, well used buildings that stand at the centre of the communities they serve, with halls and facilities that could be used, or indeed are already used, to bring the community together, be they churchgoers or non-churchgoers. During the pandemic, for example, many such churches have led the way in organising networks of support. The same pandemic, in one of its rather unexpected consequences, has changed the outlook for rural areas as, helped by the move to homeworking, families increasingly look to leave larger towns and cities to experience the peace and quiet of the countryside.

So, if anything, I think many rural churches are rather like spring bulbs, ready for the right conditions to release all the potential they hold, and to thrive. Some are already growing and blossoming, and many others will follow.

And that is why I am delighted to be writing the foreword to this book, dedicated as it is to the flourishing of the rural church. The real authors of the book are the many thousands of people nationwide who love and care for their village church. By reading about just a few of their experiences, and drawing on the wisdom of ten eminent and experienced contributors, I hope that it will inspire you and help you identify simple ideas to involve people of all ages in building a welcoming, long lasting and thriving church community.

**HUGH DENNIS**  
2022

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## INTRODUCTION

**The Rt Revd Robert Atwell** is the Bishop of Exeter and is the Lead Bishop for Rural Affairs in the Church of England and chair of the Liturgical Commission.

## EXTENDING A WARM WELCOME

This chapter was developed by members of the Growing the Rural Church Project ([growingtheruralchurch.org](http://growingtheruralchurch.org)) of the Diocese of Exeter, led by **Sarah Cracknell** and **Katharine Otley**. The project was set up in 2017 to re-imagine mission in rural communities.

## MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE EVENTS

**The Revd Canon Dr Sandra Millar** was Head of Life Events in the national Church of England for nine years with previous experience as a parish priest in Oxfordshire and as Children's Adviser in the Diocese of Gloucester.

## USING BUILDINGS CREATIVELY

**Marian Carson** is Director of Operations at the Churches Conservation Trust ([visitchurches.org.uk](http://visitchurches.org.uk)). She was previously Project Manager of the Diocese of Exeter's Growing the Rural Church project.

## CARING FOR GOD'S ACRE

**Harriet Carty** is Director of Caring for God's Acre, a national charity which promotes the conservation of burial sites and supporting the volunteers who help to maintain them. Harriet has worked in conservation herself for over 30 years.

## BEING THE HEARTBEAT OF THE COMMUNITY

**Mark Betson** is one of the National Public Policy Advisors for the Church of England supporting rural issues having a voice in both Church, government and wider society. He has also previously worked as an Environmental Scientist, a Vicar in the Diocese of Chichester and as a Regional Director for a farming charity.

## CELEBRATING OUR HERITAGE

**Geoffrey Hunter** has been Head of Church Buildings and Pastoral in the Diocese of Ely since 2016, previously working in a similar role for the Diocese of London. He served as a churchwarden in his rural Norfolk parish until 2019 and has been a member of the Norfolk Churches Trust since a teenager. Geoffrey has sat on the Church Buildings Council since 2012.

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## CULTIVATING FRUITFUL FESTIVALS

**Helen Bent** is a Worship Consultant and Trainer working with Praxis and a priest in a rural benefice. She was previously Head of Ministerial Training with the RSCM and has national involvement with GROW, the Group for Renewal of Worship and Leading Your Church into Growth.

## WELCOMING MORE CHILDREN

**Gill Ambrose** is Chair for Godly Play UK ([godlyplay.uk](http://godlyplay.uk)) and in her local community serves as a lay church minister and a school governor. She first trained and worked as a teacher and was also Children's Adviser for the Diocese of Ely for several years.

## REACHING THE ISOLATED AND LONELY

**Alison Selwood** is an Executive PA at the Arthur Rank Centre, an ecumenical national charity, which resources, trains, and advocates for rural Christians, rural churches and the communities they serve. Together with colleagues, the Revd Elizabeth Clark and Fiona Fidgin, they have been pioneering work on rural isolation and loneliness.

## COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

**Nick Edmonds** is Deputy Head of News in the national Church of England office. He was formerly in the Diocese of Guildford for six years where he was Deputy Diocesan Secretary and Director of Communications. He is also a PCC member in a rural Hampshire parish.

# INTRODUCTION

BY ROBERT ATWELL

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*'Hold fast to the head which is Christ,  
from whom the whole body, nourished and  
held together by its ligaments and sinews,  
grows with a growth that is from God.'*

Colossians 2.19

In our concern that the church should flourish, it is tempting to put numerical growth at the centre of our agenda. However, as Paul suggests, growth is less a target to be attained than the fruit of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Which is why nothing is more important for the life of the church, whether in the city, in a coastal or market town, or in the depths of the countryside than for its members to go deeper into God in prayer. Grace transforms. It releases energy for mission. It encourages us to invite others into the adventure of discipleship.

For hundreds of years our village churches have been at the centre of their rural communities. The English countryside is peppered with their towers and steeples. To a generation ambivalent about organised religion and allergic to dogma, but which craves the ether of spirituality, these buildings exert a powerful pull. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, they remind us that 'there lives the dearest freshness deep down things'. They embody in brick and stone the changelessness of God. It is why a significant percentage of the rural population continue to see the village church as their spiritual home and the venue of choice for important moments in the lives of their families, be it a marriage, the christening of a child, or the funeral of a devoted grandparent. Their choice will be shaped as

much by tradition and sentiment as religious commitment, and sometimes the parish church is the only community building left. Whatever the reason, the impact of a village church on its locality can be significant.

In spite of the fact that a higher percentage of the population go to church in the countryside than in the city, village churches are often perceived as millstones around the necks of their go-ahead urban cousins, sucking in precious resources which some claim would be better spent elsewhere. Rural clergy and hard-working lay officers often despair when they are compared negatively with large urban or suburban congregations, with success equated to strong numerical growth. Here lies part of the problem: village congregations are invariably small. But a small church is not a failed large church, any more than a satsuma is a failed orange.

This Guide seeks to fly the flag of the rural church. There are wonderful examples of exciting and healthy churches to be celebrated. There is wisdom to be shared from different traditions and contexts. Wherever we minister, there are things we can learn from each other about growth and sustainability, not least in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19's arrival in England in 2020 threw up a host of challenges, not least for small, beleaguered rural congregations. In some places, the pandemic brought to a head questions of viability that had been simmering below the surface but which had been too hot to handle. But it also generated unexpected opportunities. It forged coalitions of goodwill across historic divides, not only between different denominations but also between neighbouring parishes that paid lip service to collaboration but declined to cooperate. People rediscovered the gift of the local. In spite of patchy connectivity in remoter parts of the countryside, the internet has permitted more people to work from home and invest in their village. This bodes well for the longer-term health of rural communities, including their churches.

We have discovered new ways of being church and of worshipping online. Parishioners who for reasons of infirmity or disability were unable to attend their church felt included in the life of their worshipping community. We connected with 'the fringe' in ways that we longed to do for years. These good things need to be built on. We must not squander what we have learnt and return to old patterns; our virtual church doors need to remain open.

## HOW WE USE OUR BUILDINGS

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Of the Church of England's 15,700 churches, over 9,000 of them are located in areas of the country that are defined by the Government as rural. Of these churches, 36% are listed as Grade 1, 34% as Grade 2\*, and 21% as Grade 2. Only 9% of our church buildings are ungraded. This is a rich heritage, but an expensive one to maintain and well beyond the pocket of most village communities. The poet Philip Larkin described his parish church as 'a serious house on serious earth'. Architectural gems though many of our churches may be, one of the fundamental things that we have re-learned during the pandemic is that 'church' is people, not buildings. Now is the time to review their use and viability.

We have to face the fact that some of our village churches are not flourishing. Tiny congregations in single figures with a rising age profile, financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources have led some to pull up the drawbridge, batten down the hatches and turn in on themselves. Some can no longer muster a full complement of lay officers and those officers that are in harness often feel overwhelmed. For some churches, survival has become the name of the game.

Bear Grylls, the celebrity survival instructor, advises those marooned in a jungle to concentrate on basics: water, food and shelter. In similar vein, this Guide seeks to help those in positions of leadership, whether ordained or lay, to focus their energy on

ten basic things that can contribute to the revitalisation, recovery and renewal of their village church.

Although written from a predominantly Anglican perspective, it seeks to draw upon the experience of other denominations who have their own stories and struggles to share. Rural congregations are increasingly ecumenical. The closure of some chapels (be they Methodist, Baptist or United Reformed) or the fact that the nearest Roman Catholic church may be 25 miles away, has generated an unexpected bonus for the Church of England in swelling our modest congregations. The presence of Christians nurtured in other traditions is enriching the worship of parish churches and giving new meaning to Anglican comprehensiveness.

## WHAT IS RURAL?

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The Government currently defines rurality by measuring population density, calculated by taking the number of households in a 30km radius. It defines a settlement as rural if it has a population less than 10,000 people and a small school as one with less than 210 pupils. These definitions make many who live in the countryside laugh because it is so removed from their experience. It also reveals how slippery the word 'rural' is and alerts us to the danger of lumping all 'rural' churches together. One size does not fit all.

Village communities and their churches are much more diverse than city dwellers imagine. Some congregations like to describe themselves as rural, but in reality are suburban both in their proximity to a town and in their outlook. People can claim to live in a village, except the majority of the inhabitants are newcomers and the 'village' is a dormitory of commuters who bemoan the moment a local farmer drops manure at the bottom of their driveway. This is why many dioceses prefer to describe certain parishes as 'remote rural' or 'deep rural' to differentiate them from those

nearer market towns or larger centres of population. Typically, in remote rural areas, the same families have tilled the land for generations and there are few B roads, let alone A roads.

Unsurprisingly, remote rural communities can spawn congregations that are resistant to change, whether in relation to the introduction of new-fangled services, or the legal and structural changes of 'pastoral reorganisation', which might involve parishes joining together, boundary changes, or new ministry teams forming. Most traditional villagers presume that they belong to the church even if they do not attend it. Home groups and discipleship courses sometimes founder, not for any theological reason, but because traditional villagers may not like going into one another's houses. They know one another's business only too well and value their privacy. A minister needs to find other ways of building Christian community.

Statistically, the rural population is older than the urban population, and this is reflected in the age profile of most village congregations and the fact that there is rarely a critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them. Drawing more and younger people into the orbit of the worshipping community and encouraging them to take responsibility for the life of the church and its building is a struggle that this Guide seeks to help with. The sad reality is that in some villages, the same people are doing all the jobs, both in the church and in the wider community, and end up exhausted. The good news is that many villagers love their parish church, even if they don't worship in it. Rural communities are more rooted than their urban counterparts and have a fierce attachment to their buildings, churchyards and burial plots. We need to capitalise upon such sentiment because the bottom line is: use your village church or lose it. We need to make our buildings fit for purpose in the 21st century and make them work for their communities. If we do not, then the village church will go the same way as the village shop, the pub, the post office and the village school.

## LEADERSHIP

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As in all walks of life, it is the quality of the leadership, whether lay or ordained, that makes the difference and will determine whether a church grows or declines. Unlike suburban congregations that may have a modest pool of capable people to draw upon, the talent pool in rural communities is likely to be small. Rural clergy have little choice but to work with some individuals who are not natural leaders. That said, the strength of rural communities lies in their capacity for self-generation. People do not expect to be entertained; so they make their own entertainment. They are not on anyone's political radar and do not expect handouts; so they look out for one another. Here the rural church has things to teach the urban church. How can we release a capacity for self-generation in those inner-city communities that have become disillusioned or weakened by a culture of dependency? What is the secret of the resilience of the rural church?

Part of the answer lies in their grit. They operate on a long time-frame and have a strong sense of place. In the face of poor harvests, farmers persevere, knowing that eventually things will improve. Rural congregations instinctively understand the virtue of the old monastic prayer 'for grace to persevere with joy'. The agricultural community has an innate entrepreneurial ability to adapt. The theory of evolution, developed by Charles Darwin, was not the survival of the fittest, as is often erroneously stated. The species that survives is the one that is the most adaptable. The same is true of communities and churches. If the village church is to thrive, then it too needs to adapt. We need to adapt to a changing rural landscape: politically, following our departure from the European Union and the end of the Common Agricultural Policy; locally, in engagement with the changing nature of village communities; pastorally and liturgically, in the kind of worship we offer; and strategically, in simplifying church governance.

These themes run through this Guide in its concern to foster a spirit of entrepreneurship and experiment.

If the church in rural England is to flourish, then we need to release individual congregations from feeling that they have to be everything and do everything. Working together across an area and working ecumenically has to be the way forward. Mission and ministry in the countryside works best when people cooperate rather than compete. We need to generate an energy to work in partnership and to do so in new and imaginative ways for the sake of the kingdom of God. That is what this Guide aims to help with, by providing a menu of eminently practical, do-able things for local people to dip into and try out in their contexts. It is designed to address some key areas where applying relatively small changes can make a big difference, amplifying the efforts that may well be happening already.

Our churches are holy places that speak of God's unchanging love. If they are to survive as the home of living, praying congregations they need to recover their role as hubs of community life. And if our congregations are to thrive, they need to recover their confidence in the transformative power of the Gospel to change hearts and lives.

+ Paul Exon







“FOR I WAS A STRANGER  
AND YOU WELCOMED ME...”

MATTHEW 25.35

# 1

## EXTENDING A WARM WELCOME

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### THREE KEY THINGS YOU’LL LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER

- > If you want to grow you may need to change.
- > How to make your church as welcoming as your home.
- > Why structuring your welcome around strangers to the church, rather than those who are already friends, is key.

## INTRODUCTION

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**It is easy to tell ourselves that church is welcoming. We smile when new people come, and make sure they have a coffee and biscuit after the service. But welcome is more than this. From the language we use in signage to the way we structure our service, creating a warm welcome should be weaved into every strand of church life.**

Think about when you invite someone to your home who has never visited before. You make sure that they know where you live and where to park. You will have a quick clean before they arrive.

Once they arrive, you offer them a drink and perhaps something to eat. If they have a hot drink you try and make it exactly as they like it. You offer them a comfortable chair and when they ask to use the toilet, you ensure they know where it is. If they bring children you make sure you have toys.

You won't assume that they already know that your spouse is called Terry and your dog is Toby, or that there is a low beam as you enter the living room – you will explain all of this naturally.

You will do all of this because you want them to feel welcome, to have a lovely time and to come again. If you're really honest, you probably also want to ensure that when they talk about their visit, everything is positive and glowing!

This approach needs to be the same with churches. We need to make them irresistible places for people to spend their time. Your welcome significantly affects the likelihood of people returning (and bringing others with them). In short, the way you welcome people, or not, affects church growth. If you are frustrated that your church is not growing, you may need to change the way you do things. Change is not always easy, but the suggestions in this chapter will give you the confidence to extend a much wider, warmer welcome.

## WHO ARE YOUR VISITORS?

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Consider who your visitors are – both current and the yet-to-be-welcomed. Are they tourists on a day out? Walkers? Grave visitors? Members of the congregation? Families? Guests to weddings, funerals or baptisms? The local school children, teachers and parents? People looking for a place of peace or solitude? Elderly visitors? Or young children? Visitors with restricted mobility?

It may be that your visitors include all of the above. Try to keep their different needs in mind. Remember visiting a church can be intimidating and even quite stressful; some people worry that there are lots of restrictions and rules, and may consider church to only be for people who are “holier” than they are. A closed gate or an awkward front door is enough to put some people off all together. Some visitors may also think that attending church is old fashioned and only for the elderly; it is important that through your welcome, you show that the church is still alive, current, and that the Christian message is open to everyone.

## LOOKING AT THE PRACTICALITIES

### Parking, access and churchyard

You may have a huge car park, or none at all. What is important is that visitors can plan their visit and know what to expect. Make sure your website is clear about parking and accessibility. Consider whether the pathways are accessible for wheelchairs and prams, if they are uneven or slippery, if there are handrails and where the nearest easy access toilet and baby changing facilities are.



*If your church has a graveyard plan, make this as obvious and accessible as possible. Consider introducing seating in your graveyard, or maybe some picnic rugs and cushions in the summer?*

### What do your signs say about you?

People will judge your church when they look at the condition of your signs and noticeboards. If the signs look scruffy with an out of date poster in them, people will assume that the church itself is uncared for and dated in its approach. When looking at signage, look at the condition and whether they need a clean or a lick of paint. Be vigilant about removing out of date posters.

Look objectively at your noticeboards, or even better, invite someone else along who has never seen it and ask for their feedback.

As you look at your noticeboard your eye should be drawn to a large, warm message of WELCOME, encouraging people into church and putting them at ease. Whilst rotas, insurance certificates and so on may need to be displayed, there is no need to put them centre stage, maybe move them inside the church, or onto the website, (providing those who need it have access to it).

Remember that the welcome in the porch can make the difference between people walking in or walking away. Some may be nervous and will need encouragement to open the door. If your door is difficult to open then leave out some instructions so they don't think it's locked. If you have a service starting, have the door open with a person to greet, smile and welcome people inside.

#### Amazing A boards

Putting an A board outside your porch is a great way of reassuring visitors that the church is open and they are welcome.

## Don't let language be a barrier

Using words such as eucharist, liturgy, sacrament, episcopal, denomination and diocese is bewildering for some people. Churches have a reputation for being full of rules and things you can't do, so try and keep your signs and language as plain, positive and inviting as possible. Avoid formal language and be as warm and conversational as you can.



## Plasters, punctures and pups

If you have a lot of walkers or cyclists visiting your church, think about how the welcome to them could be made warmer. As well as water and biscuits, you may be able to offer hot drink facilities. Consider providing a puncture repair kit, a basic first aid kit, plasters, dry socks, or an area to charge mobile phones and don't forget the dog bowl! Always make sure that it is clear that anyone can help themselves; these are gifts for all, not just for churchgoers.



## Housekeeping inside the church

By clearing away any unnecessary clutter, your church will appear calmer. It also helps visitors focus on key information. Visitors are often interested in the building's history, so ensure that any information you have on this looks up to date and appealing.



## Being down with the kids

Parents may find a visit to church extremely stressful. Many feel that their children need to be silent and prevented from touching anything. How can your church make them feel welcome? Is there a clearly marked area for children to play in? Are there toys and books for different ages? Do you have nappy changing facilities?



Maybe put up a sign to reassure parents that you are delighted to welcome children and fully expect them to be noisy. Try to ensure that there is a Sunday school offer for children and make this fun!

## Cake and cushions

If you have volunteers who enjoy baking, consider offering some home baked cakes. This doesn't have to be every day; you could offer it during busy periods

or for a special event. Perhaps scatter some cushions around the church to give a more homely feel? Or have picnic rugs for people to sit on outside during the summer? A cupcake with the message "You are loved" piped on it might just change someone's whole perception of your church and give them confidence to return.



## Online

Most people will look online before attending a church – just like a restaurant, holiday or film – we research before we commit. That is where the COVID-19 pandemic was powerless to stop churches reaching people and it gave people the opportunity to watch without having the awkwardness of being watched. Make sure your website screams 'welcome'. It should be clear when your services are, how they can be accessed online (if you are offering this); there should be pictures of friendly faces, and your message to new people should be encouraging, loving and relatable. Similarly to noticeboards, be mindful of the language you use – keep it plain, positive and relevant to new people as well as existing ones. There's more about this in Chapter 10.



Photo credit: © Adam Shaw

## CASE STUDY

### A welcome in the Wolds – Weighton Wold Group, East Yorkshire.

This group of five parishes sits on the Yorkshire Wolds Way National trail. The Rector, the Revd Caroline Pinchbeck, says the numbers of people who simply visit the churches during the week, such as walkers and tourists, is around ten times the numbers attending Sunday services.

Caroline explained: *"Our spiritual heritage is the conversion of King Edwin of Northumberland in 627 AD by St Paulinus. There is much drama to the whole account which is told in our church windows.*

*"We don't have the volunteers to sit in the church and tell this story in person, so we had to think of a way to offer welcome and hospitality to this 'silent congregation'. Some of them may well have questions about faith or are seeking connection with God, and we wanted to address that. Many people are inspired by the story of King Edwin and St Paulinus, and we use this as a springboard for helping visitors think about faith and spirituality today, and for sharing the Good News about Jesus."*

If the church is closed, Caroline says there is a plastic box placed in the porch containing bottles of water, squash and biscuits. There is a Bible, some prayer cards with the 'pilgrimage window' explained and the prayer of St Paulinus. Information about local pubs and cafés, a map with suggested routes and some information about the other churches in the Group are also included.

When the churches are open, 'Top ten things to see while visiting our church' is displayed, along with prayer cards and history guides.

## WHAT ABOUT FAITH?

***“And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear unless someone tells them?”***

ROMANS 10.14 (NLT)

Visitors to your church should not be able to leave your church building without being offered well-presented information about the Christian faith. The website Lifeworlds.global produces brilliant resources which are free and look really attractive. Consider having information for visitors who may be suffering with bereavement or mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Ensure that the contact details for support services are somewhere obvious. Likewise, if there is an Alpha course or something similar running, make sure the details of this are up for people to see.

*Welcome to this church*

**WE INVITE YOU TO USE THIS SPACE TO PRAY, REFLECT, MEDITATE OR SIMPLY HAVE SOME TIME OUT**

PLEASE MAINTAIN PHYSICAL DISTANCING WHILE YOU ARE HERE AND BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHERS

**HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE PRAYER IDEAS YOU MIGHT LIKE TO TRY**

**Look at one of the church windows.** Is it plain or coloured? Does it tell a story? Can you see the light through it?  
Spend some time gazing at the window and ask God to speak to you through it.

**Use your fingers to pray:**  
Thumb - Give thanks for all the strong things in your life like relationships that sustain you.  
Index finger - Say sorry for the times you've judged others or acted harshly.  
Middle finger - Pray for all the important people who have power in the world.  
Ring finger - Remember the poor, the weak, the helpless, the hungry, the sick, the ill and the bereaved.  
Little finger - Pray for yourself. God cares about what you care about and what concerns you.

**Slowly trace the pattern of the labyrinth with your finger on the palm of your hand allowing your mind to clear from extra thoughts and focus solely on following the path of the labyrinth.**  
"Walk" to the centre of the labyrinth and rest momentarily, sharing what is on your mind with God. Take some deep breaths and observe how you are feeling. Retrace your path out of the labyrinth knowing that God is with you and has heard your prayers.

**THE LORD IS NEAR TO ALL WHO CALL ON HIM**  
PSALM 145:18

**SAY THE LORD'S PRAYER**  
This is the prayer that Jesus taught his followers and it is a

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

› An example of a prayer station

## Encouraging people to participate and connect

People may walk into your church who have never prayed before. They may find the concept of prayer extremely daunting and not know where to begin. Ensure that you have a simple prayer on display. Introduce a prayer station where visitors are invited to participate in an activity to help them say a prayer, such as a pebble bowl, a stone to hold, to write a prayer or light a candle.

Outside visitors could spot butterflies, count wildflowers, take tree rubbings, discover a labyrinth or sit underneath a tree. These are simple ideas to make visitors feel they are in a welcoming place and encourage them to actively engage with God and with your church. There are no set rules for prayer stations, so be creative. Consider outdoor spaces as well as indoor ones.

Additionally, ensure you have an area where visitors can leave requests for prayer and have a way of showing this is done. This shows visitors that they matter to you and that you care about them.

***Ensure that you have a simple prayer on display.***

## Your church today and a reason to return

Some visitors may think that your church is a beautiful historic building which now stands empty. Think about how you can communicate the life that still exists in your church, and how you can invite them to be part of your church's future.

**Do you hold a candlelit carol service at Christmas?**

**Or a Teddy Bears Parachute Jump off the tower in July?**

**Or host a regular toddler group?**

**If you do then shout about it!**

Display great photos on an internal noticeboard and on the website, (with the appropriate permissions). If your church is on Facebook, use it for this purpose and promote the page on your church communications. Don't assume that people will read about it in the local magazine.

By the time they leave, every visitor to your church should know when your next service or event is, and how welcome they are.

***If your church is on Facebook, use it for this purpose and promote the page on your church communications.***

## CASE STUDY

**Steve Fenning is the Lead Pastor of Forge Church in Suffolk. Steve is the son of a farmer and has always had a passion for rural ministry.** The church he leads meets in Debenham and has grown from 24 to 300+ people over the past 30 years ([forgechurch.com](http://forgechurch.com)).

*Steve on the key to church growth:*

"I am often asked why the church has grown, and I think it comes down to several reasons:

- 1 We are intentional about reaching out to unchurched people and being inclusive in our language. We have a clear vision and a clear mission. People might not like everything we do, but we have a clear purpose and we stick to it.
- 2 We have put real energy into what we offer to children and young people, employing staff to oversee the kids and youth congregations and being involved in local schools.
- 3 The physical environment is so important. We invest a huge amount of time and resources into making our kids, youth and adult venues warm, inviting, creative and enjoyable spaces to spend time in. This involves a lot of setting up each week!
- 4 Maintaining a consistent approach in our worship and teaching style has given the congregation confidence to invite family and friends to services on any week - whether in person or online."

## THINKING ABOUT THE SERVICE

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Whether your services are online, in person, or both, here are some key points to remember:

- > This might be someone's first ever Sunday in your church, so make sure you are designing your services for the lost and not the found. Always assume you have new people coming and make sure they have everything they need.
- > Whoever you have up front is who you will attract to your church. So if you want to attract more people in their 20s, try and get someone in their 20s to do the opening welcome. If you want to attract a broad range of people, have several different people welcoming and hosting each week.
- > Never assume that people will know who you are, or who other people are. Remember to always introduce yourself and avoid saying things like "Speak to Jane after the service...". Who's Jane?!
- > Briefly explain where the toilets are, or if you're online, how to use the chat facility. Explain how long the service will be.
- > Never underestimate the power of sparkling toilets! Think flowers and hand lotion, as well as nice handwash.
- > Avoid using insider lingo and abbreviations. Don't just assume people know what the PCC is or what 'intercessions' means.
- > Explain the meaning of songs before you sing them.
- > Explain who the author of the book of the Bible reading is and give some context as to when it was written.
- > Keep your sermons authentic and personal, to be enjoyed not endured. People want to see the real you and hear about real struggles and triumphs. That's what Jesus did – he told stories about everyday life.
- > Give people a hook for next week's service or a clear next step, such as details of a fun kids' event coming up, a new course starting which will help people explore the Christian faith, or details of how to get in touch.
- > The welcome isn't just for the beginning of the service. Ensure people are given a warm 'goodbye' and 'hope to see you again sometime' as they leave.



## Angling your welcome

Think carefully and objectively about who your welcome is aimed at. Are you serving the wants and wishes of your current congregation, or are you angling your welcome towards those people who haven't yet stepped inside your church? It is very easy to fall into the habit of serving your current congregation over the needs of newcomers.

Here are two true stories of when a church, without realising it, focused their welcome on their current congregation:

- 1 It was suggested to a rural churchwarden that it might be more welcoming to have a basket of children's toys and books in the church, to which she replied, "That won't be necessary as we don't have any children in the congregation."
- 2 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Diocese of Exeter produced a poster explaining the restrictions and providing contact details if people needed someone to talk to. A churchwarden asked if the contact details section could be removed saying: "There are only about 28 people in the congregation and we all have each other's numbers, so it's not necessary to put any contact details up on a poster."

Both of these people are dedicated and hard-working members of the church, who genuinely want their church to flourish. Their mistake was to focus on the needs of the people who already attended, rather than considering the needs of the many people who didn't.

We need courage to say to the 99 that we are going to make some changes to find the one lost sheep. This may involve going against their preference for the sake of that purpose.

## GREAT RESOURCES

**Canva** is a brilliant online design system which makes it really easy to design attractive posters, flyers, Facebook posts etc: [canva.com](https://www.canva.com)

**ReSource**: Resources to enable little, local and ordinary churches: [resource-arm.net](https://resource-arm.net)

**Arthur Rank Centre**: [arthurrankcentre.org.uk](https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk)

**Rural Ministries**: [ruralministries.org.uk](https://ruralministries.org.uk)

**The Further Faster Network**: [furtherfaster.network](https://furtherfaster.network)

**New Wine Rural Team**:  
[new-wine.org/networks-ministries/rural](https://new-wine.org/networks-ministries/rural)

**Lifewords** do some great free Christian resources:  
[lifewords.global/shop](https://lifewords.global/shop)

**Christian Publishing and Outreach** for posters and resources: [cpo.org.uk](https://cpo.org.uk)

The **Everybody Welcome** course by Bob Jackson and George Fisher from Church House Publishing:  
[chpublishing.co.uk](https://chpublishing.co.uk)

A free digital welcome supplement - **Everybody Welcome Online** - is available from CPAS: [cpas.org.uk](https://cpas.org.uk)

**Welcome Guide** produced by Growing the Rural Church in the Diocese of Exeter:  
[exeter.anglican.org/welcome-resources](https://exeter.anglican.org/welcome-resources)

**LightWave** in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich offers all kinds of helpful resources for rural outreach:  
[lightwave.community/resources](https://lightwave.community/resources)

**God for All** is an ecumenical coalition based in Cumbria with lots of outreach resources any church can try:  
[godforall.org.uk/resource-downloads](https://godforall.org.uk/resource-downloads)

# AFTERWORD

BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF YORK

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**F**rom cultivating fruitful festivals to children's spirituality to how to make the best of your churchyard, this timely and helpful book about how village churches can thrive has been full of practical advice and encouragement.

There is much I found exciting in this book, but it was particularly encouraging to discover how the rural church uses technology to develop its mission as well as making use of all the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us. For at the heart of the Church's witness is the constant desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to make him known in all our communities.

And, of course, we are all aware that learning to live compassionately and justly with the Earth of which we are a part is the greatest challenge facing the human race – and this is yet another area where the rural church takes the lead.

If you live in the country, you know that growth happens in due season. You know that a tree in winter is no less healthy than a tree in spring. You know that things bear fruit at the appointed time. And you know that if you want things to grow then you must pay attention to the roots. So having now read the book I hope you will have found it to be a new gardening manual for the village church.

My hope and prayer is that it will not only be of practical benefit to thousands of rural churches in England, but also restore confidence that the village parish church continues to have a viable future and occupies a vital place in the whole ecosystem of the Church of England.

✠ **STEPHEN EBOR:**

## ADVANCED PROOF EXTRACT

**This warm, engaging book celebrates the treasured place of village churches and offers a feast of imaginative and practical ideas for strengthening their life, enriching the ways in which they serve their communities and identifying fresh potential.**

Drawing on a wealth of shared wisdom and experience, a variety of contributors share stories and reflect on innovative practice in ten key areas of rural church life:

- 1 Extending the warmth of your welcome
- 2 Making the most of baptisms, weddings and funerals
- 3 Using your buildings creatively
- 4 Caring for your churchyard
- 5 Being the heartbeat of the community
- 6 Celebrating your heritage
- 7 Cultivating fruitful festivals
- 8 Welcoming more children
- 9 Reaching the isolated and lonely
- 10 Communicating effectively.

**Fully illustrated in colour and abounding in encouragement, this will renew confidence in all who minister in rural contexts or who belong to village congregations.**

**How Village Churches Thrive** is introduced by Robert Atwell, the Bishop of Exeter and Lead Bishop for Rural Affairs in the Church of England. It also features an Afterword by Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York.

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