



The Church of Scotland

# God's Own Country

A Practical Resource for Rural Churches

Connecting with your Community



# CONNECTING WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

## Rural Churches: Mapping the Future Dr Donald Smith

There is a long tradition of recording rural communities. When, at the end of the eighteenth century, Sir John Sinclair set about the first statistical account, he turned to parish ministers through Scotland to describe their area and its inhabitants. These, of course, were the historic 'civil parishes' recognised by Church and state alike.

Since then, the game has become much more complex. A mass of central and local government records exist along, of course, with census returns – a direct descendant of Sinclair's Statistical Account – but it is not easy to relate these sources directly to the modern rural parish. On the secular side defining rural is not always straightforward (see Rural Scotland, an Overview) while from the church perspective multiple reorganisations (including schisms, unions and linkages!) have also complicated the picture.

In most circumstances statistical information will be helpful but not sufficient for local planning in a fast-changing environment.

### Community – A Shared Project

If one Scottish Enlightenment luminary, Sir John Sinclair, began the numbers game another, Patrick Geddes, can claim to be the founder of local planning.

For Geddes community participation is vital, but such involvement is only possible when we have formed a shared picture of the area under discussion. Ideally this would be an actual visualisation as a map, a photo-montage, a real or virtual model, an artwork – or a combination of all four! One local example of Geddes' technique is the Camera Obscura on Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

Supplementing this visual panorama in Geddes' day was an exhibition illustrating Edinburgh's place in Scotland, Scotland's in Europe, and Europe's in the world. At the top alongside the camera obscura chamber was a separate enclosed space for meditation and spiritual reflection on the significance of it all. Apparently, though, he took people through it at such a pace as to leave both him and his students completely breathless at the top!

However, visualisation as a method is invaluable and today we have more sources than ever to build the picture.

For Geddes a community map needed to identify Places, People and Activities.

Places	Key physical features, symbolic locations (eg war memorial, burial ground), meeting places, community focal points and service centres.
People	Their numbers, locations, activities, key roles and personalities.
Activities	Means of livelihood, key social and leisure activities, their relationship or non-relationship to places.

And so on.

There are lots of ways to build a picture but the critical factors are:

- 01** Mapping should be a group activity involving people with different insights, perspectives and experiences.
- 02** What should emerge from the mapping are the vital relationships between places, people and activities.
- 03** Mapping is a people-centred project, not a committee. Community mapping is an invaluable first step towards 'taking stock'. It is great fun and should always involve a creative sense of play. Needless to say, the whole exercise would be invalidated if only church activists participated. The visual element lends itself to exhibitions and displays, inviting further input and comment.



## Next Steps

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Many things will be reinforced by community mapping rather than discovered or overturned. New perspectives may also open up however and one of these could be the implications for the churches: the way they operate and express themselves within the wider community.

### Obvious issues will include

- a** Are the churches relating across the make-up of the community?
  - > place-wise
  - > people-wise
  - > activity-wise
- b** Are church activities and church places in balance? This may consider not only church-owned buildings.
- c** Are there denominational issues of overlap and/or gaps in provision?
- d** Is the timing of church activities driven by clergy availability or community need?

Is there a match or a mis-match between local people in the community and those involved in church leadership ?

The project group will come up with many other questions, some specific to the local circumstances.

It is, I think, fair to predict that in many rural communities today, a significant proportion of the population will not be actively involved in church life. It is therefore vital that the next steps should include some form of engagement with those who are not currently making any contribution to shaping or sustaining the church's presence. Otherwise any potential outcomes will be one-sided and possibly one-dimensional or inward looking.

**How could this be done? Here is a mix of options, which may be used in combination.**

- a** A community meeting to reflect on the map and its implications for the churches. This should include small group discussion and feedback.
- b** A community questionnaire, asking about existing church activities and people's ideas for future ones. This might be best done face-to-face as a visit, depending on individual households and local circumstances.
- c** A storytelling project, gathering people's perspectives and experiences on community life past and present, within your area and/or reflecting their experiences elsewhere. This could provide a way of getting to know people better across the community.

## Storytelling Project

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Stories could be gathered through interviews, by involving a school or other community organisation, or through a series of internal sessions in which someone feeds in the first stories in order to encourage others to contribute. Everyone's perspective, whether an anecdote, reminiscence or personal story, is to be welcomed and valued. A pattern for storytelling group work is illustrated in an appendix to this article - it can be adapted and altered to meet local circumstances.

It could be argued that stories provide a rich fourth dimension to the Places, People and Activities of community mapping – an emotional and experiential dimension which touches directly on people's values, beliefs and spirituality.

## Christian Presence

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All of the steps outlined above are, of course, a sham if you do not have a need or a readiness to develop or reshape the expressions of Christianity in your area. The exercise will be all the more rewarding if you are ready to contemplate radical change 'from the bottom up'.



### What might such changes involve?

- Creative investment to change buildings.
- Better communications.
- Partnerships involving giving a share of control to people not already inside church structures (such as young people).
- Real and practical ecumenical sharing.
- New links with other churches (neighbouring, urban, international).
- Challenging centralised plans and developing creative alternatives.

It is realistic, however, to highlight the shape of ministry as central to the future of the rural church. If the life of rural churches is based solely, or even primarily, on the work of a paid professional ministry then rationalisation and reduction are likely to predominate for the foreseeable future, in the United Kingdom at least.

If, on the other hand, the Christian presence in any community is the expression of a shared and diverse ministry of talents, then anything may be possible. In the words of Attie Mackechnie (1921–2005), the great tradition bearer of the Ross of Mull,

*“I was brought up to see ministers as awesome – to respect the cloth. But I know now everybody has a ministry. It’s up to you what you make of it.”*  
(from Conversations with Attie by Jan Sutch Pickard)

### Moving On

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Nothing is more constant than change. There was never a rural golden age. Lowland, Highland and Island areas in Scotland have experienced successive waves of economically-driven changes in recent centuries, including migration, emigration, clearance, urbanisation and the havoc wrought by war. Ironically, any sense of rural prosperity last century was a by-product of the two World Wars which deprived rural communities of a disproportionate number of their young people and precipitated social change.

The past was not all good and, for every rosy memory of rural church life, there are records of religious disputes, isolated clergy and social snobbery. The journey of discipleship begins now and leads forward. As a wise theologian once remarked, “Christianity is written in the future tense”. Re-shaping the rural stories can begin now.

### Appendix: Introduction to Storytelling – Programme outline – Principles

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A Storytelling course or workshop requires creative interaction between the facilitator and the participants. Participants should experience first and then reflect upon their experience to realise general principles or themes.

People need to be affirmed in, and then encouraged to develop, their contribution.

The course should not presume any outcome or result, but be based on the value of the sharing and communication in its own right.

## Structure

The programme includes four two-hour units which can be used over a weekend or over four weekday sessions. In addition, any unit or combination of units can be expanded to provide a day long programme.

Please note that if the group exceeds ten in number, a longer time will be needed so that the contribution of each participant can be heard and a response given.

Alternatively, activities could be divided over an increased number of sessions.

### Session 1

- a** Begin with an ice-breaker, or introduction, for example ask each group member to say something about their name – where it comes from, why they were called this name and any other name they might use, such as a middle name, maiden name or birth name.
- b** Ask participants to recall a story, anecdote or memory about their family. Then reflect:
  - > Who told them this story?
  - > How/when did they hear it?
  - > How did they remember it? An image, a person/character, a saying, a tone of voice, a personal experience.
- c** Connect this discussion with the key features of an oral story, that is, a story that has to be remembered in order to be told. Imagery, clear characters, voices, clear structure.
- d** Ask participants to bring a story connected with a particular place to the next session. The sense of place should be significant in some way in the story. Emphasise that participants are not being asked for a polished performance - the story is the thing! Give people a length guideline, e.g. 5–6 minutes (this can be expanded if you have a longer session).

### Session 2

- a** Open the session by presenting a short story of place. This is purely a 'warm-up' but make sure that your story exhibits the key characteristics of an oral story and is appropriate to the group.
- b** Invite participants to share their stories. After each story, affirm the storyteller and their contribution and invite other participants to say what they liked or found interesting about the story and ask any questions.
- c** How did the group remember their stories? Did anyone use notes or read their story? Use this to introduce the topic of oral memory – how do we remember things and what is it that sticks in our minds?

- d** Tell a local story to complete the session.

- e** Ask participants to bring a short local story, anecdote or memory to the next session and to tell it without notes, in the oral style. A guideline of 5–6 minutes should be given unless you have a longer session.

### Session 3

- a** Invite each group member to tell their chosen story from Session 2, in succession.
- b** Invite positive comment and discussion. Let participants say a little about why they have picked this anecdote or story.
- c** Circulate a set of postcards or post-its to group members. Ask each person to write down on an individual post-it or card what they think the important part or meaning is of at least half of the stories they have heard.
- d** Assemble the cards or post-its and see what similarities and differences there are between the stories.
- e** Ask participants to prepare for the last session a personal experience, incident or story that relates to your local community or locality.

### Session 4

- a** Welcome participants to this session as if it were a storytelling event at which you are the host. Let everyone have a drink as they arrive.
- b** Invite participants to present their stories. Affirm each one with comment/response in between but allow only informal reaction from the group.
- c** Close the session with a general feedback and discussion on the course programme as a whole.
- d** Forward each participant an overall written feedback on what it has revealed about the people who live in your community, the stories and any connections or things that have emerged.

For an overview of storytelling in Church life, with group work, discussion topics and examples, see *Shaping Stories, Year Two* in the Art of the Parish training series published by the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

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# COMMUNITY VALUE TOOLKIT FOR RURAL CHURCHES

## Introduction

At the 2006 Church of Scotland Rural Conference, Jill Hopkinson (National Rural Officer for the Church of England) highlighted that “a small church is not a failed large church”. There is a danger that small rural churches attempt to measure their success or lack of success against the standards which would normally be applied to large urban churches. This can be misleading and discouraging.

In a rural area the church is very much part of the community and even for people who do not attend, the presence of the church is still important. The threatened closure of a church building highlights just how important that building is to a particular community even if interest in it had seemed to be dormant.

In a whole variety of ways, rural churches ‘add value’ to their communities. If we only count the numbers attending worship on an average Sunday, we might well think our impact is very limited. It can be a struggle to maintain regular Sunday worship, but our influence is greater than we think, both through the impact of the congregation as a whole and individual members in their lives and work. We need to reflect on the different ways in which we already make our mark on our community and ask in what ways we could improve our impact. This Community Value Toolkit is intended to help you to identify and highlight the widening influence of the church in the community, like the ripple from a stone thrown into a pond.

Some statistical background to this exercise is helpful (you may wish to consult your local council website), but it should be left to a small group to gather this basic information and avoid the whole group becoming ‘bogged down’ with figures. The numbers do not need to be wholly accurate. They are intended to provide an approximate statistical background to the discussion which will follow in small groups.

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## Interpreting the Results

When everyone has answered the questions in Section 2 individually, the group leader (or a small group) will collate the responses by placing one tick for each person’s score in each of the boxes. This will give a visual representation through the balance of where the ticks fall. (For example, if 6 people score 4 for question 1, then 6 individual ticks are placed in that box.) If there are a large number of responses, then the ticks should be grouped in ‘fives’. If the group wishes to see its high and low score for each question, then the ticks can be added up, with an extra ‘Total’ box added after the ‘A lot’ column.

For presentation purposes, a copy of the questions, with ticks, can be placed onto an overhead projector acetate or a PowerPoint slide.

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## Questions

- > Is there anything that surprises you about your responses?
- > What are you most encouraged by in your responses?
- > From what you see, what is your greatest opportunity for outreach into your community?
- > Share some stories about how your congregation is already working with and adding value to its community.

## Part Two - Church Involvement

### Introduction

This part of the toolkit deals less with figures and more with our understanding of the impact and place the church has in the life of the community. It is more subjective, and should be filled in initially by individuals, but the figures will be gathered together at the end to give a basis for discussion. This should help you identify and value the strengths and distinctiveness of your congregation and perhaps indicate potential areas of growth.

Please put a tick in the box in the grid which best reflects your assessment.

	What involvement does our church have in ....	Not very much	A little	Quite a bit	A lot
01	Enabling people who have different life experiences to get to know each other?				
02	Making welcome those who are often excluded (eg people with enduring mental illness, asylum seekers, homeless people)?				
03	Helping people to make sense of the changes in society and our communities (eg rural depopulation, diversification, influx of 'incomers')?				
04	Helping people to identify ways in which the local neighbourhood could be improved (in terms of amenities and general wellbeing of residents)?				
05	Helping people take better control of their lives as a result of their involvement in the church and their exploration of faith?				
06	Supporting people in bereavement and illness?				
07	Encouraging or enabling others to take on commitments in the local community or through voluntary activity?				
08	Helping people prepare for marriage, and supporting them within marriage (marriage enrichment, counselling etc)?				
09	Offering an accessible (physical) space which enables people to reflect quietly and express their spirituality?				
10	Helping people reflect on values that underpin their life and encouraging a sense of purpose?				
11	Being alongside people in a crisis?				
12	Helping people relate better to one another in forgiveness and reconciliation?				
13	Helping people to have a wider experience of life outside the local community (eg pilgrimage at home or abroad, volunteer work overseas)?				
14	Helping people take account of others in the way in which they live their lives (eg being aware of environmental issues)?				
15	Making a helpful contribution in emotionally charged situations such as national or community crises or periods of intense media attention?				
16	Enabling people to develop leadership potential or specific skills (eg public speaking, use of gifts and talents)?				
17	Helping people to work on the things that they feel 'pull them down' (eg unhelpful habits and behaviour)?				
18	Helping children and young people to explore and develop a personal faith?				
19	Helping children and young people develop a sense of personal responsibility and attentiveness to the needs of others?				
20	Being generous, hopefully in a way that affects others?				

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# CONNECTING WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

## Pastoral Care and Social Capital

Rev Dr Richard Frazer

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The perception of what it means to be rural has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. The Scottish countryside has been the provider of food, leisure, a glimpse of nature, natural resources and cultural identity. In one sense rural Scotland continues to provide all of these things and many more; however, the extent to which it provides these 'public goods' has shifted. Agriculture has become less important whilst tourism has boomed, for example, and many of the characteristic ways of life traditionally associated with rural Scotland have vanished in the shift to a more 'global' culture. More people are prepared to commute to the cities for work and have moved into the countryside where; in some places they have actually stemmed the tide of de-population.

In many of the discussions that take place about rural life in Scotland, the focus is often on the contribution that the rural economy makes to the nation's overall wealth. There is however another capital contribution that can readily be overlooked and that is in the form of 'Social Capital' which can be described as the creation of an "attitude, spirit and willingness of people to engage in collective, civic activities". The time involved can often be measured in generations as Social Capital builds an infrastructure of shared perspectives and collective cultural values.

### Informing National Character

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Many people have understood that there is a degree to which the qualities that shape national identity are frequently derived from rural ways. We all take pride in Scotland's diverse landscape, but it is important to realise the degree to which those who have lived from it shape it. 70% of Scotland's land area is deemed to be agricultural land. We have very little truly pristine, wild areas - Scotland is a managed environment, and we owe our pride in Scotland's beauty to those who have tended it down the centuries. Similarly, whilst Scotland is rightly renowned across the world for its Enlightenment thinkers and pioneers in science and engineering - often based in urban centres - many of the values and characteristics that have shaped Scottish identity and cultural perspectives have emerged out of rural ways. Robert Burns, the ploughman poet, epitomises a personality shaped by the land and rural values. Equipped by that rural based "Social

Capital" and his own scholarship as well as a deep-rooted spiritual vision, he became a poet of humanity, universally acknowledged as one who speaks to the very heart of what it is to be human.

### Pastoral Care and Social Capital

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The consequence of change in the shape of rural life carries with it the potential for loss of what I call "Social Capital" - the cultural currency that enables community. It is a delicate pastoral challenge for the church to honour the cultural, moral and social heritage of Scottish life, whilst at the same time acknowledging the inevitability of change and the potential for conflict and loss that goes with it. How do we build new forms of "Social Capital" that will strengthen community and help to build the networks on which our wellbeing as a society depends?

Let me illustrate now with a story about loss that emerged out of a pastoral encounter during the Foot & Mouth outbreak of 2001. George is a farmer in the Scottish Borders. He is a tenant whose family have stewarded the same land for generations, at least since the mid 19th Century. George, his wife, Ruth and their children constitute a traditional rural Scottish family; their farmhouse is solid, plain and utterly unostentatious. They are hardworking, thrifty people, who take a pride in the care of their land, the health of their livestock and the wellbeing of their community. They are the sort of people to whom it is possible to attribute many of the noblest aspects of Scottish culture. They have not sought to make a fortune from farming but their strong sense of who they are provides its own moral and spiritual capital.



In the immediate aftermath of the Foot & Mouth epidemic of 2001, George was a broken man. He was in grief not just for his cattle, all of which had been slaughtered the previous week - a harsh enough burden to bear - he lamented something that ran far deeper. He was in mourning for the end of a way of life. Foot & Mouth was just one factor in what he recognised was the end of an era for his family and many others like him. He doubted that his way of life would be able to continue.

George had seen his demise coming long before Foot & Mouth took away his livestock. He had heard politicians frequently talk down agriculture. Agriculture contributes less than 2% of GDP, employs only a tiny number of people and many a politician has made some cheap political capital by lamenting the fact that 40% of the EU budget goes to agricultural support. Many farmers in Scotland today approaching retirement age remember a time when they were told that they were public servants, contributing to Britain's food security in the aftermath of two World Wars in which the nation had nearly starved. Now, in the global economy, those who had helped feed the nation and care for the landscape were being discarded.

## Managing Change

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What we continue to witness in rural Scotland is change. People frequently say about rural life that they welcome newcomers and that for schools and communities to continue to thrive, fresh ideas and people are desperately needed. But people often say that whilst they welcome new blood they do not want new people to transform their community into a version of the place they have left. In a context in which traditional rural occupation is experiencing steep decline, preservation of a former way of life is not an option. However, managing change is a challenge for the churches. There is an important task for the church to identify the stresses that change brings and an opportunity for the church to become the lubricant that helpfully eases transition.

If Social Capital is the currency of communal life, then the church must be at the heart of nurturing and building it. If a community of people moves to a new situation, it is important not simply to lament the loss and feel nostalgia for the old ways. What is required of us is to identify those indispensable tools that contribute to Social Capital and make sure that we take those tools with us to the new place and do not leave them behind. The church has many of the tools for generating Social Capital at its disposal. It has communal space available not just for worship but countless other gatherings. It is committed to being a constant presence in even the remotest areas. The church has chosen not to abandon rural areas just because the economy is on the down turn or the population has declined. The church's very presence is an affirmation of worth.

In addition, the church has been the heart and soul of rural communities in the past. Sometimes and in some situations it has found itself being more the soul of a changing community than its heart. The challenge is to find ways in which the church can be at the heart of rural communities once more and not be just a remnant of the "old order." The Arthur Rank Centre ([www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk](http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk)), based at Stoneleigh Park, has pioneered a huge range of resources and initiatives for the churches in England and Wales to do just that, and in Scotland we are tapping into that resource and developing our own.

The church is a theological and cultural resource for a community, enabling it especially in a time of change to reflect through the lens of spiritual and moral insight. The churches can ask the questions and invite people to discuss what it means to be a community and what is required of us to build new communities of trust, respect and diversity in the emerging cultural landscape of 21st Century Scotland. The theological insights of forgiveness, compassion and justice enable the church to be at the heart of situations of conflict that always accompanies change and offer wisdom and safe space to build cohesion and renewed spiritual capital.

People constantly ask the question, "what is rural?" The answer is that increasing numbers of people who live in rural areas are only "rural" in the sense that they live in the countryside. In every place, however, there is an identified need to rebuild and facilitate a sense of community and shared values. The church must be in the vanguard of articulating what tools we require to do this.

As we seek to offer pastoral support and care to those who live within rural Scotland it is important that we understand the contribution of traditional rural culture to our national character. The timeless and invaluable wisdom of rural values have contributed down the centuries to what I have characterised as our Social Capital. In a world increasingly shaped by homogenised global values, there are subtleties and insights that come from a people in touch with the rhythms of nature and the landscape that we overlook at our peril.

Our society is driven today by the pursuit of endless economic growth but the values and structures that contribute towards lasting wellbeing, based on thrift, sufficiency and a willingness to engage in shared cultural activity that creates community, have no price. In our pastoral care and support we help people best when we honour, understand and appreciate the extent to which Social Capital as much as jobs and livelihoods nurture us as individuals and as a community.