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Surviving as an evangelical in a non-evangelical rural church.

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Living the Christian life and serving the Lord will never be easy wherever the Lord puts His people but there is little doubt that to be an evangelical Christian in a non-evangelical rural church presents very special problems.

For many of us, especially for those who live in urban areas, the rural scene is very appealing. It has certainly been so during this hot summer! There is nowhere more attractive than the English village with its stone built houses and fragrant gardens, clustered around the beautiful old church that sits in what used to be the grounds of the manor house. What a glorious place to be a Christian and to exercise Christian ministry. Or is it?

The rural scene presents a number of hurdles to the evangelical Christian that are hugely difficult to overcome. Take, for example, the beautiful church. It is often impractical for effective gospel work: access by foot or car is restricted and car parking limited; there is no loo or kitchen and no meeting room for mid week groups and children's work on Sunday. The priority for the PCC is so often the preservation of the building and its contents, including the organ, and no thought is given to why the building was built in the first place. And any suggestion that the church could be reordered to make it more user friendly by, for example, replacing the pews with more comfortable chairs or the installation of a sound system – let alone the provision of pew Bibles! – is met with derision and opposition.

The rural church is likely to be dominated by the “old guard” who are suspicious of innovation (We don't want any happy-clappy stuff here!), and who are determined to preserve the church and all that takes place in it in accordance with what makes them feel comfortable. It goes without saying that the Church Representation Rules have often not been heard of and if they have they are simply regarded as unnecessary bureaucracy. The result of all this is, of course, that Christians go elsewhere, normally to the nearest town, rural congregations shrink, parishes are amalgamated and archdeacons impose ministers who will conduct services in accordance with the wishes of the “old guard” but who have no experience of, or training for, teaching the Bible. The rural church will survive because there is always money to repair the roof or the organ and there is a natural topping up of the “old guard”.

For the evangelical in this sort of situation survival becomes a matter of real concern especially if there is no Bible teaching church of any denomination within reach. What then?

First, weigh up very carefully whether it is worth taking on the “old guard”. Will your opposition be productive or counter-productive? Do they actually understand the issues or even care about them sufficiently to make intelligent dialogue worthwhile? Probably not. Since disengagement from the church is not an option, involvement in the church as much as possible, particularly on its committees and councils, will be an encouragement to those who recognise the futility of the “old guard” and may be used by the Lord one day to soften hard hearts. This involvement in the management of the church will ease the introduction of some survival aids. What could these be?

The small group – the real church! – is the key to survival. Even if it is a very small group, including folks from neighbouring parishes if necessary, that meets together regularly to study the Bible, it will give succour and encouragement. Mention the existence of the group to the minister

and to the PCC, advertise it in the parish magazine, make it open to others to join and persevere even if it seems not to be growing. The small group is the lifeline. From it other activities will flow: the Christianity Explored course, or something similar, suppers, barbecues and garden parties each with an evangelistic talk included. Keep the minister informed and, if at all possible, included so that there is no hint of a splinter-church being formed.

The aim is to nurture the evangelical Christians and to help others, including the “old guard” to see their need to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. To this end it may be possible to provide an alternative to the weekly communion service which is threatening to the outsider and does nothing to build up the believer. The mid week service is becoming increasingly popular as a means of drawing to church those people, particularly those with young families, for whom the weekend is precious “family time”. It may be possible to hold a mid week service of the word, where the emphasis is on expository Bible teaching, perhaps just once a month. It is important that the minister should be seen to be taking a part in this to avoid the impression of a splinter-church and ideally it should be held in the church or, if this inconvenient or threatening, in the parish hall. High quality preachers are essential and it may be necessary to invite folks from some distance away to help out.

With much prayer and faithful preaching and teaching of the Word in the small group, other activities and the mid week service, the Lord will bless the work and sooner or later someone will come to faith. Then what? It is essential that they are nurtured and this will demand careful attention and much time. The small group may be too daunting, at least initially, in which case one to one Bible study and fellowship will be required. But at all costs keep them away from the “old guard”!

Surviving as an evangelical in a non-evangelical rural church can be disheartening and frustrating but with prayer, patience, godly and gracious leadership, bold initiative and, above all, with prayer even the “old guard” can become targets for God’s good news of salvation!

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