
Embodied, Contextual, and Rural

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Introduction¹

It is an honor to be invited to speak to this gathering of people who are passionate about rural ministries, people, and places. I have spent the past several years reflecting on the challenges and opportunities facing rural churches in the Scottish Borders and the UK in general.² As it is impossible to summarise a 324-page PhD thesis in anything less than several days, this will be a snapshot rather than a feature-length film. Nevertheless, I hope to capture something of the essence of my research and offer you something to take away as you return to your own contexts. I will highlight some key elements that have informed my reflections, writing, and teaching about rural ministry, incorporating elements from reports and seminars I facilitated during the process, and use examples from my experiences as a way of inviting you to reflect on your own perceptions and assumptions about rural ministry.

Background/Setting

Before I continue, I should provide some background as a framework for what will follow. Given the topic, it is essential for you to understand something of my experience and perspective.

To begin, my research focused on the Church of Scotland and communities along the southern border with England. The Church of Scotland is a national church, which may require some explanation at a later point, but for now, you simply need to know that it is Presbyterian in polity and has, historically, committed to being present in local geographical areas. The Church of Scotland is widely diverse in terms of theological interpretation and expression, which can be a mixed blessing. As of 2016, 43% of the parishes (which may include multiple churches within a geographical area) in Scotland were classified as rural, although, following a structural reorganization in 2019, there is no official representation of (or for) rural churches at a national level within the Church of Scotland.

1. Preface: In April 2023, I presented the following keynote paper for the joint Rural Ministries and International Rural Churches Association Conference in Dubuque, Iowa. While this paper has been edited for publication, I have intentionally retained much of the colloquial language from my initial presentation, including points for discussion and reflection.

2. Heather J. Major, "Living with Churches in the Borders: Mission and Ministry in Rural Scottish Parish Churches" (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2022), <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/id/eprint/82766>.

In 2015-16 a local Presbytery in the Scottish Borders approached the University of Glasgow with a proposition to appoint a Mission Research Worker who would engage with the lived realities of rural churches in Scotland, producing a thesis that focused on the challenges and opportunities facing small rural Presbyterian churches in the twenty-first century.

In 2015-16 a local Presbytery in the Scottish Borders approached the University of Glasgow with a proposition to appoint a Mission Research Worker who would engage with the lived realities of rural churches in Scotland, producing a thesis that focused on the challenges and opportunities facing small rural Presbyterian churches in the twenty-first century. In doing so, they hoped the resulting research would offer a useful counterpoint to a discussion dominated by urban or suburban perspectives and applying models of mission and ministry originating in large churches in England or North America. While there are some vital resources and studies examining rural churches in England and Wales, they are largely based on Anglican or Methodist church traditions or alternative expressions of church known in the UK as "Fresh Expressions" or "Pioneer Ministry."³ At the time of my

3. A selection of such publications includes: A. G. C. Smith, *God-Shaped Mission: Theological and Practical Perspectives from the Rural Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008); Rona Orme, *Rural Children, Rural Church: Mission Opportunities in the Countryside* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007); Jeremy Martineau, Leslie J. Francis, and Peter Francis, *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004); Sally Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011); Simon Martin, *Resourcing*

research, there was virtually nothing that had been written on Scottish Presbyterian rural churches.

I moved to the Scottish Borders in October 2016 to begin a period of intense immersive ethnographic fieldwork, living alongside local people, and investing in communication and building relationships. Over the following twenty-seven months I participated in a range of community activities and attended both churches on a regular basis. I was actively involved in discussions, activities, and initiatives as a participant observer, using my experiences as the foundation for my PhD, which became increasingly autoethnographic and reflexive as I recognised the extent to which my presence and participation influenced local churches and communities while simultaneously influencing my perception and interpretation of events. My research, and my finished thesis, was shaped by stories; simple stories of fleeting impressions and more complex stories of interwoven experiences that shaped my understanding of rural theology and the importance of *place* for small, rural churches and villages. The title of my thesis was “Living with Churches in the Borders,” reflecting the physical or geographical place and the metaphorical position of the churches in relation to an uncertain future.

When I began my fieldwork, I quickly discovered that people in the local congregation and Presbytery expected me to come in with the answers that would turn their churches around. After all, I was the outside “expert” who had theological training and ministry experience. Instead, I concentrated on building relationships with local people and listening to stories about their experiences of church. I participated in church meetings, had conversations with village residents in the local shop and hotel/pub, joined in with community events and visited people’s homes. As I did, I heard stories of decline, neglect, anxiety over the future, despair, fear, and grief. I also heard stories of vision, excitement over new opportunities, hope, and celebration. In October 2019, I presented a summary of my findings to the local Presbytery, some of which I will be sharing with you today.

As I lived alongside the people of the Borders, I was drawn into their stories, discovering the importance of embodied presence, contextuality, and rurality in answering the question about sustainability in rural Scottish churches. No two churches are the same. Neither are the people or the places. However, it is my hope that you will find elements that resonate with your own experience and context.

Context as a framework for understanding

In beginning my research, I was given two specific case study churches on which to focus my attention, within the broader context of the local Presbytery. Both congregations were part

Rural Ministry: Practical Insights for Mission, ed. Jill Hopkinson (Abingdon, United Kingdom: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015); Andrew Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside: A Model for the Future*, Rev. and expanded ed (London: Continuum, 2003); James Bell, Jill Hopkinson, and Trevor Willmott, eds., *Re-Shaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009).

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of different multi-church linkages (where multiple churches are under the oversight of individual ministers) and both were on the edge of their respective villages. Both churches were also historic churches, by which I mean churches with several *centuries* of history. I found attested records of Christian worship on both sites dating back to the late eleventh century and one of my case study churches still had original Norman architectural features and stonework around a door.

The churches could easily seat 400-500 people but only had a regular attendance of between 10 and 30 (depending on the week), averaging around 21 to 23. The church I call Braedubh in my thesis met for worship every Sunday morning. The church I call Riverglebe met only twice per month, but that was a new development around the beginning of my fieldwork. Prior to the retirement of their previous minister (after 40 years in the same parish), they only had worship once per month.

Both congregations were going through transition. Riverglebe was united with another congregation and re-grouped with another set of churches under an existing minister when their former minister retired. Braedubh was in an extended vacancy of 3.5 years when I arrived and subsequently called a new minister around 18 months into my fieldwork. The vacancy had been difficult as it was accompanied by a new linkage between churches that was described as “not a natural link” due to conflicting mentalities, cultures, and personalities. Although it made sense geographically, the Presbytery plan had not considered the socio-economic, historical, or cultural context of the respective congregations.

Important words

I have chosen to title my presentation “Embodied, Contextual, and Rural.”

Each word contains a world of meaning and possible interpretations, so I would like to begin with a little audience participation. Given the size of our gathering, it may be impractical to have you all shout answers at the same time so I would like you to turn to your neighbour and spend the next few minutes talking about each word before I ask for a summary.

1. What does the word “embodied” mean to you?

2. What about “contextual”?
3. Finally, what does “rural” mean? What does the word “rural” make you think of?

When I think of the word “embodied” I think of many things, some of which I will address later. You may have others that come to mind, but these are some of the words or phrases I associate with the term:

- Intentional Incarnational Presence
- Holistic responses to REAL world situations/scenarios
- Physicality
- Messiness
- Authenticity
- Relationship

The word “contextual” invites questions. When I speak with church members, ministers, and students I am repeatedly encouraging them to reflect on whether they are paying attention to the world around them. It can be easy to operate in a particular context without examining it. We should be considering the socio-historical, cultural, interpersonal, physical, and economic realities of our surroundings and situations. We should also ask how we interpret our experiences and respond to situations. So often we have underlying assumptions about situations based on our personal background which can limit our understanding of what is really happening. When we think of the context of our churches or towns, we should be paying attention to the whole story: people, place, space, history, society, politics, economy, etc.

This is particularly important when it comes to thinking about what it means to be “rural.” Concepts of rurality are widely debated, often reflecting presuppositions about a “rural idyll” reinforced by fictional accounts or media portrayals.⁴ The ways in which rural areas are defined in popular culture generally correspond with population and location, but statistics and geographical features provide little insight into the nature of rural life and mentality. In 1988 the Rural Theology Association held a conference which agreed that rurality was best described in terms of values and relationships rather than discussions of locality, employment, socio-economic structure, or population.⁵ In 1991 the authors of *Church and Religion in Rural England* agreed that *perception* is of more significance than objective classification.⁶ Landscape, accessibility, and scale or size of population remain important for the appearance of “rurality” but cultural expectations

4. Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800*, (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 1–12; Woods, *Rural*, 16–49.

5. Mervyn Wilson, “Values of Rural Life and Christianity”, in *The Rural Church Towards 2000* (Bulwick: Rural Theology Association, 1989), 28–33.

6. Douglas Davies, Charles Watkins and Michael Winter, *Church and Religion in Rural England*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

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of community life and social interactions or values affect the perception of certain places as “rural.”⁷ Within rural studies there are four traditional approaches to defining rurality: *descriptive, socio-cultural, locality, and social representation*, but it is increasingly common in contemporary rural studies to approach rurality as a *social construction*.⁸ This provides opportunities for researchers to consider the range of sociological, historical, cultural, geographical, demographic, structural, economic, environmental, political, and philosophical features that “shape people’s experiences and perceptions of contemporary rurality.”⁹

In practical ministry terms, what it means to be “rural” may look very different depending on your experience and perspective. As we spend time with an international, rural community it is important to recognise the different types of rural life. It is possible that your rural place is an island community that depends on fishing as a primary source of food or income. Perhaps your rural place has become dependent on tourism as people pursue dreams of the rural idyll and escaping from city pressures for holidays. Maybe you are struggling to maintain a small family farm in the face of pressure from conglomerate agricultural firms focused on profit with no desire to care for biodiversity or sustainability. Maybe your rural community is primarily nomadic, following herds through migration patterns and moving dwellings from place to place rather than establishing fixed buildings and boundaries or fences. Maybe your rural place has been settled for centuries, with land divided by immovable stone walls and houses passed from generation to generation.

Now What?

When I speak about the importance of “Embodied,” “Contextual,” and “Rural” approaches to ministry and mission, it is essential to

7. Michael Woods, *Rural Geography* (London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2005), 15; Michael Woods, *Rural* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–15.

8. Keith Halfacree, “Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourses and Alternative Definitions of the Rural”, *Journal of Rural Studies* 9, (1993), 23–37; Woods, *Rural Geography*, 5–15.

9. Woods, *Rural Geography*, 15.

consider the reasons why they are significant.

To begin with, being “disembodied” results in problems. Many of those who are engaged in rural churches or in training people for rural ministry fall into the trap of idealizing the possibilities and failing to be “present” in the messiness of lived reality. As people who are involved with rural churches (or churches in general) we have all been guilty of planning things or dreaming about what it could be like in a perfect world. This is especially true when we try importing programs/models because they work elsewhere and then getting discouraged when they don’t follow our plans/ideas because they are not contextually appropriate for our situation.

This is mirrored in much of the theological training available in our colleges, particularly in the Western world. Too often our training focuses on ideals or types rather than recognizing the importance of *being* and *listening*. In practical terms, this is often demonstrated in the disconnect or conflict between expectations and perceptions. The ordained clergy have a particular idea about what ministry looks like in this situation while congregations have a different idea. For example, a congregation that is used to being actively involved in the work of the church and acting with autonomy in setting up Bible studies or house groups is likely to have difficulty with a new member of clergy who is used to having direct oversight and authority over every aspect of ministry. The reverse is also true where a congregation expects the clergy to do everything while the clergy is trying to encourage church members to be involved and lead according to their gifts. In the midst of the inner conflict, the wider community may have a very different perception about what the church is doing.

Another problem with being disembodied and disconnected from the local context is a tendency toward isolationism and/or elitism. This may apply to the congregation as a whole or to individual members, particularly clergy. How can you meet the needs of people if you don’t know them? Engaging in rural ministry and mission requires walking alongside people where they are rather than where we would like them to be. The church in rural areas is embedded in the community in terms of physical location, *but*, is it embedded socially? Or would members of the surrounding community see the church/church members as “other”?

Even as we reflect on what we think of as being “rural” it is important to recognize the changing face of rurality. As Woods observes, “experiences of living in the rural vary enormously between individuals.”¹⁰ In addition to individual experiences, there are complex interpersonal dynamics within local rural communities.¹¹ As society changes and people move between rural, urban, and suburban places, we need to pay attention to who is present and how they understand “belonging.” In *God’s Belongers* (2017), David Walker identifies four ways in which

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people “belong”: through personal relationships, places, one-off events, and regular activities.¹² In his 2006 article on “Belonging to Rural Church and Society,” Walker classifies people who belong in rural communities according to twelve types.¹³ Although we do not have time to look at them today, I would encourage you to read his article and think about parallels with your own community.

Before going into more detail about my research and what I have learned through the process, I invite you to reflect on the word *shalom*. We have heard it mentioned repeatedly over the past few days, sometimes in the context of peace and reconciliation, but it carries a wealth of meaning relating to wholeness and completeness. As an Old Testament lecturer, as well as a practical theologian, I am drawn to the concept of seeking *shalom*, praying for, and working toward the fulfilment of God’s work in the world and in our communities. As I have been walking alongside rural churches, communities, and ministries, I have become convinced that engaging in holistic ministry as rural people in rural places has the potential to facilitate revival that involves both reconciliation and restoration.

The Scottish Context

In my PhD research I had two specific case study churches and a multitude of thoughts which were ultimately distilled into one overarching question: *Is there a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches?*

After twenty-seven months of fieldwork and countless hours of reading or engaging in conversations, it became clear that the answer to my question was complicated and challenging. In a presentation to the local Presbytery who had supported my

10. Woods, *Rural*, 162.

11. Michael L. Langrish, “Dynamics of Community,” in *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, eds. Jeremy Martineau, Leslie J Francis, and Peter Francis, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), 21–43.

12. David Walker, *God’s Belongers: How People Engage with God Today and How the Church Can Help* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2017), 18–62.

13. David Walker, “Belonging to Rural Church and Society: Theology and Sociological Perspectives,” *Rural Theology* 4, no. 2, (2006), 85–97, esp. 86–89.

research, I summarised my findings as follows:

The current model of ministry and mission in rural Scottish parish churches is unsustainable. It relies on dwindling resources, both human and financial. It is overly dependent on ordained clergy, which includes active full or part-time salaried or stipendiary clergy and retired clergy providing pulpit supply. The majority of Scottish rural churches are burdened by deteriorating and/or inaccessible buildings, many of which are prohibitively expensive to keep warm, maintained, and insured. As a result of the challenges with buildings, dwindling resources, and aging congregations, many rural churches are increasingly isolated and inward-looking, unable to envision a future or challenge the persistent narrative of decline that is widespread across Scottish churches.

I found a lack of training, education, support, discipleship, and accountability for office bearers and church members. Very few of the office bearers (either elders or deacons) I met during my fieldwork had received any form of training and, as a result, had a poor understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Several had been recruited by ministers who needed people to take on practical jobs and were deeply uncomfortable at the thought of having a conversation about “spiritual” things. One elder openly admitted that he did not believe in God but enjoyed Sunday services as a place to have a bit of a sing and reflect on life. Within my case study churches and many of the other churches I visited during my research I found an underlying expectation that ministry and mission were the job of the paid/stipendiary clergy. For some, this stemmed from an insecurity about the roles and responsibilities of “laity” and they felt ill-equipped to engage in activities that were traditionally associated with ordained clergy. For others, their experience of church was largely passive, and they had never considered the possibility that ministry and mission might be participatory.

Churches and church members were overwhelmed, exhausted, and discouraged by diminishing resources (human and financial) and the pressures of maintaining traditional forms of worship, organisational structures or buildings, and familiar weekly activities. Both of my case study churches occupied sites where Christian communities had worshiped for centuries. They were deeply embedded in local history and culture, struggling to adapt to changing times and situations. As a result, I found that church members were anxious about the future and what could or could not be done, focusing on obstacles rather than opportunities. When people discussed the possibilities of trying something new, I found a preoccupation with practical, social, or programmatic “fixes” without a sense of understanding about the focus and purpose of ministry and mission.

You may be forgiven for thinking that this is quite a depressing tale; however, despite my conclusion that the *current* model is unsustainable, I continue to believe there is *potential* for a sustainable future for rural churches in Scotland (and beyond) *if* we, as rural ministry practitioners and educators, are willing to embrace change and creativity.

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As I spent time with people involved in rural churches across Scotland it became clear that there are networks of relationships between church and community members which could be developed. People know their neighbors in rural areas. Natural conversations occur over the garden fence, walking the dog, visiting the shop, or wading through snow. There is a culture of hospitality which remains, even as towns and villages change, and new people move into the area.

There are exciting developments happening at small, grassroots levels based around the interests and abilities of individuals. There are pockets of enthusiasm and excitement about new initiatives. There are people who are full of ideas about things to try that are based around local relationships and knowledge. How do we, as rural church advocates and ministry practitioners, address the challenges of the current context and embrace the opportunity to enter a creative and sustainable future for mission and ministry?

I would like to offer six areas of consideration, some of which may be appropriate in your context, although I am fully aware that they are specifically rooted in my experience of rural Scottish churches and may not be directly applicable to your experience.

Embrace the local community/geographical area as the mission field.

I believe the future for rural churches requires actively serving the people of the area, not just those who regularly attend church or are on the membership roll. Churches in small rural/semi-rural places are ideally situated to engage in the community through existing interpersonal relationships or involvement in community groups.

Embracing the local community as the mission-field will include prioritizing resources according to the village/town or area rather than focusing exclusively on those who attend Sunday services. This is about meeting people where they are and living out the Christian faith in practical ways throughout the week. This includes working ecumenically with other churches or Christian organizations and seeking to serve local people and communities for the glory of God.

Restore/Recover an understanding of the purpose of mission and ministry.

Speaking about the sustainability of mission and ministry involves reflecting on the *purpose* of mission and ministry: sharing the good news of God's love and transformative power.

Many short-term initiatives are focused on developing social networks or increasing community involvement. This is a good thing in and of itself; however, it does not reflect the role and calling of Christian churches and disciples to share the good news. Without the gospel, is it really a "church" or mission? Likewise, seeing mission as merely a means of increasing the number of people attending Sunday services can be demoralising for those in the church and create resentment for those in the community who feel the pressure of being "missioned." Instead, as Christian churches with the freedom to tell people about the transformative power of God's love and salvation, it is possible to be excited about sharing our faith rather than apologetic or ashamed of it. It is good news!

The secondary component of this is the opportunity for working ecumenically with other churches or Christian groups in sharing God's love and working for God's kingdom. Unity with other Christians has the potential to encourage those in the church and present a healthy witness to those in the community. Seeking *shalom* (peace, restoration, completeness) in the local parish includes reconciliation between Christian churches/groups to present a unified witness to the glory of God, celebrating with each other rather than competing, dismissing growth or initiatives and complaining because it is not happening "in our church." A true recovery of mission will see the benefit of encouraging people to grow in faith regardless of their church connection or association.

Actively seek God's inspiration, direction, vision, and provision through biblical and theological research and reflection, prayer, meditation, and fellowship.

We have time and space to come together and say, "God, where are you at work?" To believe that God *is* working in our homes, in our communities and in our churches. Lives and churches can be changed when we truly believe that God is at work. Our ability to engage in mission and ministry should be an extension of our discipleship and calling, enabled, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Too often we are focused on "Maintenance" rather than "Mission"—maintaining forms, buildings, traditions, and services.

It should go without saying that the future of mission and ministry in rural churches needs to be theologically grounded in a sense of calling to work together with God in the local area. If we hold to the belief that God is at work in the world, this includes working in and through local churches. The Presbyterian church in Scotland was founded on theological principles of discernment and God's sovereignty, among others. Accounts of revival in Scotland repeatedly emphasize the related roles of prayer and worship. The call to seek God's presence is a key component of discipleship and

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an invitation to the whole church, not simply those in positions of leadership or perceived authority (i.e., not just for ministers).

The practice of corporate discernment, reflection, and prayer was little evident in the daily life of the churches I spent time with in the Borders but is something I have witnessed in churches across a wide variety of geographical locations and denominations in Scotland and beyond. For this to work, there must be time and opportunities to share together, learning from each other and encouraging one another. Pray for one another, for churches and communities, and believe that a future is possible.

Actively seek to build communities where people are being discipled and lives are changed.

There is an urgent need for creating spaces where we intentionally invest in encouraging development and opportunities for growth in faith and service. Discipleship is one of the key areas to develop in order to ensure sustainability. For people to engage in mission and ministry they need to know their faith and live it out in daily life. Discipleship was once explained to me as "doing life together" and "becoming more Christ-like" in the way I think, speak, and act. This includes encouraging people to be actively involved in ministry and mission throughout the week. During my fieldwork I witnessed an insecurity among church members when it comes to talking about faith or spiritual matters with "non-church" people. They struggled to articulate their faith and were unsure how to have a conversation about spiritual things. Current concepts of "mission" and "ministry" imply that such things are the "job" of the trained clergy or missionaries, with a specific form or approach that is unsuitable for "regular people."

Training, mentoring, and releasing church members to be missionaries in the local area, ministering to their neighbors, includes modelling a life of discipleship and intentionally building their confidence. These types of transformative communities are attractive to those who are looking for a sense of purpose and belonging.

As I moved through my daily routines during the months of my fieldwork, meeting people and talking with them about life, I found people who were curious about spiritual things. People

asked me what I was doing, what I thought about churches, why I believed in God, whether I believed the Bible to be true, why I was a Christian, and how it affected my life. Why did I bother going to church? One person said, “if they had told me in church that it was supposed to affect my daily life, I might not be a Buddhist now. I became a Buddhist because I wanted to be transformed.”

Recognise the seasonality of forms and models of ministry and practice.

Rural churches and communities are blessed with an awareness of the seasons of life and change, from planting to harvest, lambing to butchering, height of summer to dead of winter. The rhythms of life in the surrounding countryside have a direct influence in the way people think, feel, and act on a daily basis. The seasonality of the world we live in shows us how important it is to change and adapt.

When I was in the Borders I was introduced to the phrase, “It’s Aye Been,” which is a Scots phrase that is often understood and interpreted as, “It has always been this way and will always be this way.”¹⁴ The people, churches, and communities who were described as “Aye Beens” were often dismissed as unable or unwilling to change, but as I spent time with them, I found many were either fearful of change or overwhelmed and exhausted by maintaining current programs to the point where they had no energy to imagine doing things differently. As I continued to journey with people, I found that much of the fear about change or trying new things appeared to be focused on the possibility that the change may be the way things will be done for the next fifty years.

Throughout my fieldwork I used the expression, “if ‘aye been’ does not become ‘could be’, it will be merely a ‘has been’.” In other words, there is a time to let go of “aye been” in order to embrace the possibilities of what “could be.” In order for there to be a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural areas, there is a need to take risks and try new and creative things *for a season!* Accepting and embracing seasonality gives permission to try new ideas for a period of time, then take time to review, reflect, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses. There is a blessing in times of transition, such as vacancy or the arrival of a new minister, because there is freedom to try new things. These times of transition can be times to reflect, evaluate, and try new things.

Transformational change needs to be consistent with the existing narrative of a church, congregation, and community.¹⁵ This will be about adapting to local people and places, looking at what suits the local situation and context. It is possible to institute change in long established churches/congregations, but it is important to recognise the underlying purpose, ideology, and understanding of the local church in order to facilitate change well. A congregation who views their building as a resource for serving

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the community is more likely to embrace the idea of opening their building for “secular” community events than a congregation who views the building as a sacred space dedicated to Christian worship.

Having spoken about the new things, it is important to recognise the need to let go of what is no longer working/appropriate. It can be tempting to keep doing something just because it’s “aye been” or because it’s “expected,” but that is a poor use of time and resources. During my fieldwork I regularly asked about the reasons for doing certain things. In some cases, the reasons had been lost to the mists of time. In other cases, they still knew the “why” but had never stopped to consider whether the particular practice or action was still fulfilling its purpose.

If it is time to let go of something, be sure to take time to grieve. Tell the story and celebrate the blessings as well as weep over the challenges. It is only by clearing the decks that people will be able to move on. If something fades or is pushed aside without being acknowledged and is simply no longer talked about, people can be resentful about the “new” thing because they have not been given space to mourn, grieve, and celebrate.

Engaging in a regular practice of reflection, evaluation, and revision has the potential to encourage congregations to embrace opportunities for change, but it is important to do so in the context of the church community. As you share the journey with members of your church and the local community, invest in coming alongside and walking the journey of “being with,”¹⁶ listening to those who are present and being intentional about looking for/listening to those who are the quiet ones. As I said in my report to the local Presbytery, “Do NOT simply listen to the loudest voices! You MUST look for the people who watch, learn, and breathe.” It is very common for ministry and mission to be dominated by big personalities and lose track of those who are less obvious but no less important.

14. Major, “Living with Churches in the Borders,” 223–229.

15. Much of the conversation around congregational narratives stems from James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

16. Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* (London: Canterbury Press, 2018); Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).

Move toward a “whole church” model of ministry.

In Scotland, as in many other rural places, there are fewer and fewer people training for ordained ministry. As a result, churches are either reliant on retired clergy to provide pulpit supply or grouped with other churches under the oversight of a clergyperson. Clergy are being stretched to provide leadership for multiple churches and, in many cases, are burning out at a truly terrifying rate. While I am undoubtedly showing my own particular theological bias, I believe that every Christian is called to engage in ministry and mission. It is not simply the job of the minister; however, this requires prioritizing teaching, training, and equipping church members to serve each other and the local community (our neighbors) for God’s glory.

Moving away from clergy dependency will mean a shift in church culture as the role of the ordained clergy becomes one of training, equipping, facilitating, and accompanying church members in a life of faith and ministry. It will also require a change in culture within congregations as members take responsibility for developing creative and innovative practices and “ministries” that reflect their interests and abilities, responding to the needs of the local community.

However, I am consciously aware that conflicting expectations about who can be involved in ministry/mission can mean that churches need to engage in a lengthy process of sensitive reflection and teaching. It is important to recognize that some churches are ready and raring to go with ministry in their local communities and feel suppressed by a minister who wants to control every aspect of ministry in the church. Other ministers are beating their heads against a brick wall with congregations that expect them to be the “one-man-band.” Neither is healthy or sustainable.

Ministry and mission should be carried out by the Body of Christ *regardless of age or gender*. We all have gifts, talents, abilities, and callings. The church is healthiest when every part is functioning together. So, how do we start “whole church” ministries?

- Make space for each other and recognise that **every** member has a contribution to make that is consistent with the gifts and talents God has given them.
- Take time to get to know each other in order to recognize their gifts.
- Start small—have a conversation, read your Bible together, pray for one another, etc.
- Remember that serving in mission and ministry does not have to be in the church building, or as part of services or programs. Every individual Christian has a calling to be involved in ministry and mission in every aspect of their lives as a natural extension of their relationship with God, so meet people where they are.

Moving away from clergy dependency will mean a shift in church culture as the role of the ordained clergy becomes one of training, equipping, facilitating, and accompanying church members in a life of faith and ministry.

Conclusion: A missional call to incarnational embodiment

As I bring this session to a close, I encourage you to reflect on what it might mean for you to embrace a call to be embodied, contextual, and rural in your approaches to ministry and mission. In the midst of everything I have said so far today, I also offer a caveat: while it is important to be embodied and contextually sensitive for your particular ministry space, it is also essential to be engaged in meaningful dialogue and accountability with those who inhabit other spaces. It can be easy to get tunnel vision and be overwhelmed by the particularity of your situation. As rural ministry people, we need to be in relationship with other people who are passionate about God’s mission, learning from each other and sharing our stories across contexts, countries, and continents. As we continue to listen to each other and spend time sharing the stories of people and places, pay attention to where God is at work.

Throughout my fieldwork and writing my thesis, I focused on people, places, parishes, and practices. My experiences were contextual and unique to each location, group of people and opportunity. My approach to research was rooted in investing time in *being with* people and accompanying them through a journey of discovery and reflection as I asked questions and participated in activities or events.¹⁷ As I did so, I came to appreciate the unique capacity of rural churches to embody Christian mission through every action and interaction as they are embedded in their local villages. I suggest that we, as people who are passionate about rural ministry, should embrace a vision for rural churches to be incarnational, providing practical and pastoral care, discipleship, training, and spiritual oversight to everyone within their local area.

Through my research, I have been convinced that it is essential for rural parish churches in Scotland to recognise their unique calling and capacity to engage relationally with those in their local contexts. Furthermore, I am convinced that rural churches, ministries, and Christian communities around the world are at the forefront of mission. Churches and church members are *already* active in their towns and villages. I suggest their greatest potential lies in encouraging, equipping, and releasing their members to be

17. Cf. Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, 8–9.

missional witnesses in their everyday lives, where they seek to join in God's mission as the incarnational embodied representation of the *missio Dei* in their geographical area.¹⁸

As I reflected on my experiences in the Scottish Borders, I concluded that the starting place for a robust rural missiology is an encounter with God in rural places with rural people.¹⁹ Beginning with the *actions* of God may be a helpful way to facilitate an encounter with God by encouraging people to reflect on God's active presence and participation in the world. I propose that rural churches should embrace their contextuality and calling to be *present* in the local community. My research indicates that many rural churches are on the border edge of recognizing their capacity for intentional, missional relationships with their neighbors and I suggest it is time for churches to engage in critical theological reflection on their existing practices as they envision their future. My research led me to conclude a sustainable future for mission in rural parish churches in Scotland, and beyond, is one that is an embodied, holistic expression of participating in the *missio Dei* as witnesses to the saving love and transforming power of Jesus Christ in the created world. If God is at work in rural places, then there is a future for ministry and mission. The challenge we must face is whether we are willing and prepared to partner with God in the messiness and uncertainty of what it means to embrace embodied, contextual, and rural ministry and mission in the places we live and work.

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18. Alan Billings, *Lost Church: Why We Must Find It Again* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013), 124–128.

19. Major, "Living with Churches in the Borders," 244–245.