

# Belonging in rural

**Ultimately we belong to God and the Bible shows different ways in which belonging to God works out in practice.**

## Place

God, in the Old Testament, promises to give his people a place to live. Land is central to the Old Testament, God's people belong to him by living in the place he has given. In the New Testament the promise is, "I go to prepare a place for you".

## People

"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." God relates to specific persons, individually and corporately, and the Old Testament Law outlined how relationships with God and with other people were to be managed. The New Testament Epistles build on this and describe belonging to "the household of God". Metaphors of leadership, like the shepherd and the ambassador, illustrated how people belonged to, and were responsible for, each other.

## Events

The people who belonged to God were the ones who had experienced particular happenings – in the Old Testament: the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Ten Commandments, crossing the Jordan. In the New Testament: the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, Pentecost; all these were one-off events.

## Activities

There is surprisingly little in the Bible about belonging through activity. However, the early church picked up on the regular worship of the synagogue. Those who joined the weekly worship belonged.

Rural churches give opportunities to belong in all these different ways.

The activity of weekly worship is one way that people belong. It is usually from those who take part in the activity of regular worship that people are recruited into the activities of PCC membership, housegroup, Mother's Union etc. Frequently it is those who belong through activities who organise events, work with people and manage the church building.

Rural churches are often very good at organising one-off events. They may be "hatch, match and dispatch" or they may be the summer fête, harvest supper and Christmas carols. They are all events that people can go to without a presumption that they will go again. For those who express their own belonging through regular activities this can be a source of frustration, but the biblical picture of belonging has more about belonging through events than activities.

The days when everyone in a village could relate to the Parson have gone. Nevertheless, belonging through relationship with a recognised church officer remains important. A neighbourly visit to someone in need means more if it is made by a person (lay or ordained) who has some sort of recognition from the church.

The church building gives a sense of place to a community. Often quarried from local stone and with monuments and fittings that tell the village story, it provides a way to belong. For those with parents, grandparents and other relatives buried in the churchyard the belonging can be particularly powerful.

All these different ways of belonging feature in the biblical story and all need to be understood and valued. This is not always an easy thing to do, as we all tend to assume that our own way of belonging is what matters really!



But how are different people in a village likely to belong? A village is likely to include:

- Commuters. It is worth remembering that the word 'commuter' did not exist before the 1960s. Distances travelled to work may be significant and jobs may be demanding, leaving little time or energy for involvement with the village. Some may be long-term residents with roots in the community. Others may be passing through.
- Privacy seekers. For those with high profile stressful work lives, the village may be a place of escape into anonymity. Their home is both a castle and sanctuary in which to escape.
- Trophy owners. Success in acquiring wealth may be shown by buying a large rural house. Sometimes that success will be demonstrated by taking on an important role

# communities



in the community. Buying the “Old Rectory” can go with trying to take on a role like the Old Rector!

- Established residents. Farmers, shopkeepers, those who have been in the village for generations. They are likely to have seen major changes in their village over a long period.
- Travellers & gypsies. Traditionally providing seasonal labour to farms, now facing great challenges over sites.
- Lifestyle shifters. People wanting to escape the pressures of the rat race and urban life and who are looking for a simpler, more natural life.
- Absent friends. Often these are younger people who cannot afford housing and are forced into nearby towns. They may well have gone to the village school, been part of any village youth club, shopped in the village shop and drunk in the village pub. Their ancestors are

still in the village, often in the churchyard.

- Full time dwellers. These overlap with ‘established residents’ but also include spouses of commuters. Home workers are a significant phenomenon with increasing numbers of people running businesses from home thanks to the internet.
- Migrant workers. From almost anywhere in the world, but increasingly from the newer European Union states, they provide affordable labour for farming and other industries.
- Missing vulnerable. Typically an elderly person. Increased health needs may force them to move to the town where the services are. The nearest residential home may be several miles away.
- Arriving vulnerable. A person whose spouse or partner has died, who moves to be nearer to children and grandchildren.

With no other connection to the area they may suffer isolation.

- Tourists & visitors. From the mass trespasses of the 1930s on to the (much misunderstood) Right to Roam legislation, urban Britons have been staking their claim to be part of rural Britain.
- The Great British Public. The emergence of the Countryside Alliance points to a dispute about who the countryside belongs to. The introduction of the Single Farm Payment is likely to reinforce the view that it belongs to the taxpayer. Public money, it is argued, is paying for public goods.

These obviously overlap, and all have some sort of belonging to or some feeling of ownership of, the countryside and a wise rural church will try and offer ways of belonging that are appropriate for each group. A ‘privacy seeker’ is unlikely to want to belong through reading the lesson as part of the ongoing Sunday worship. They might, however, be glad to slip in quietly and remain anonymous in a carol service. The ‘absent friends’ and the ‘missing vulnerable’ are likely to need to belong through people (e.g. contact with church officers), events (e.g. coming to the fête) or place (e.g. coming back to the local church for occasional offices).

The challenge to the rural church is to find ways to celebrate all this diversity of belonging while helping people find their way towards the One to whom we all ultimately belong. ■

**This article is drawn from an article by Rt Rev David Walker in Rural Theology Vol 4 Part 2 2006 Issue 67 ISSN 1470 4994, and thanks to him for permission to use it. The insights are his. Any heresies are mine!**

*Revd Robert Barlow  
Rural Officer,  
Diocese of Worcester*

belonging and believing