

# The future of Rural Ministry and Rural Church buildings

*Israel is a luxuriant vine  
That yields its fruit.  
The more his fruit  
increased  
The more altars he built;  
As his country improved,  
He improved his pillars.*

*Their heart is false;  
Now they must bear their  
guilt.  
The Lord will break down  
their altars,  
And destroy their pillars.*  
Hosea 10.1-2

Hosea is an amazing prophet who really did practice what he preached. He didn't just talk, but performed God's message to his people, by marrying a prostitute, looking after her children and forgiving her and taking her back whenever she betrayed him or ran away. He set an extraordinary example of forgiving and redeeming love and used that example to bring to life his prophetic words about God's longing, forgiveness and love to faithless Israel. The man of God therefore took on the woman, Gomer, who was seen as nothing, the lowest of the low, and raised her up to be a real person, recognised as worthy of love and attention and who has an important part to play in the promise of redemption. Surely here we are reminded of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery, that extraordinary moment when the woman is given her life back, a fresh start as a significant person before God.

When we think about the future of rural ministry and buildings, there are all sorts of practical things to consider, but there are important biblical and theological issues here too. For example, what is rural



ministry actually for? Hosea makes a point about what happens when improvement starts and the money begins to come in. Surely that's a good thing, we want our rural places to prosper and the terrible financial problems that have afflicted farmers and other rural industries to go away? Surely rural ministry could be part of that process? Wouldn't it be good to spend money on buildings and have more clergy and lay people working in the area? Well maybe, but not if we have to sell our soul along the way.

Prophesying to a country constantly under siege from the Assyrians, Hosea asks Israel to learn a hard

lesson. It is not enough to have more places of worship, to put more into ministry, if the by-product is complacency and self-satisfaction. Nor is it a good idea to go for easy solutions, the way Hosea's wife thinks she will run off to her lovers. It is all too easy to create a 'false heart' which leads to destruction. It is not strange then, that Hosea gives Gomer's first child a name which means God sows.

That is not to say that we must look at what is happening in the countryside in black and white. You can't just say that the disaster of foot and mouth is a punishment from God and fall down a fatalistic hole. Rather the message is that there is always a way back, even if it is hard and terrible, and rural ministry is at its most prophetic when it is living that truth alongside country people. So, in looking at the future, we must hear Hosea's gospel of redeeming love. His biblical message is: start with the heart. ■

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