



Salt and yeast in rural communities

Given the antagonism between the early church and much of the society surrounding it, it might seem surprising that the positive value of today's rural church is so widely recognised. Grace Davie's article suggests one reason: people appreciate having a group who can "believe on behalf of others", and those who can conduct ritual "at critical points in their lives".

I would suggest another: people of faith make a special contribution to community vibrancy as has been shown by the report *Faith in Rural Communities* (ACORA, 2006). And often churches are the catalyst or dynamo for significant positive developments in village life. This surely is just what Jesus' teaching should lead us to expect.

Where Jesus' models of salt and yeast become more controversial is with his rider that salt needs to be distinctive, and this means Christians may find themselves at odds with the very societies they seek to serve. A well-known exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (by John Stott, IVP, 1978) is entitled *Christian Counter-Culture*.

Of course evangelism and mission need to be especially sensitive in the rural context. But Biblical models surely don't suggest there should be a 'comfortable' acceptance of the idea of vicarious religion although Davie is surely right to observe this is often what we find.

The term 'vicarious' in Christian theology has had more to do with suffering. Jesus' death has been understood to be on behalf of others. This is of course a central idea for many. But though Jesus' role is unique, those who follow him may also find themselves suffering for others as they live out their discipleship in the countryside, see Colossians 1:24.

More generally Davie's argument points us to a profound insight about the People of God in both Old and New Testaments. They are called out to be distinctive, but for the sake of those outside their number. The danger is that they can think of themselves in the wrong way as superior. And, as in today's rural community, the 'outsiders' can wrongly think they have no need for the religious community in their midst.

Speaking practically as a country vicar, I'm always delighted when individuals can be freed from 'churchy' roles to do more in their communities (e.g. working for parish councils, village halls, children's activities, environmental groups – not to mention informal relationships). Yet maybe this is not so much "vicarious religion" as a concern for the kingdom taking priority over concern for the church.

I'm glad to have seen a church sponsored men's group debating controversial topics over many years in the local pub, in the way Grace Davie suggests. But I note that the strength of this group is that it has no hard boundaries and involves a good many who are not regular worshippers. So it was with many of the debates Jesus engaged in. Originally the group was intended to promote church growth. If, instead, it promotes kingdom growth in the village, that must be a good thing. ■

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