

# An introduction to Lightening the Load

**Rural communities, rural life and rural ministry are a huge blessing, as those who live and work in the countryside know. There is so much to celebrate about the mission and ministry of our rural churches, so much that reflects the nature of God and responds to his call to be disciples of Jesus, so much faithful prayer, service and witness. Season by season rural churches are growing in prayer, making new disciples and serving the people of Devon with joy.**

Nonetheless, those who worship and minister in rural Mission Communities also know that rural ministry involves heavy burdens which threaten to squash the joy of being a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus said: **“Come to me all you that are weary and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”** (Matthew 11: 28– 30).

The trouble is, it doesn't necessarily feel that way for clergy and laity in the parishes.

Coronavirus made us even more aware of this than usual. The pandemic hit the UK in March 2020, bringing enormous suffering, grief and anxiety to many individuals and families. It affected not just those who caught the virus, but those who suffered the economic consequences of the lockdown.

Many people working in our hospitality, tourism, agriculture and retail sectors were badly affected.

Across the country, our church buildings were locked and we had to find a fresh way of being Church. Worship went online or over the phone and clergy and laity reached out to their neighbours even more than they had before.

There was pain in that: people missed being together, worshipping together in person, receiving Communion, face to face pastoral care. But there was also innovation, imagination, creativity.

The virus also made us pause and reflect. We took stock, we questioned, we wondered. Part of that focussed on our Church life. We became more acutely aware of what was important to us about our faith – what sustained us, what we missed.

But we also became more aware of the burdens we had been carrying – what weighed us down, what we didn't miss.

This pause provided us with the opportunity to reimagine Church and consider how to lighten the load. What needs to change to make us fleet of foot in our mission and ministry as we engage with a post-Coronavirus society?

## This resource

**Lightening the Load** is a set of resources to be used as a Mission Community, as you reflect on the joys and burdens of rural ministry, and consider how we might celebrate the former and lighten the latter.

### An overview

**Celebration:** This session encourages celebration of our rural church life. You will be invited to reflect on what is life-giving about rural ministry, and consider how our traditional measures of 'success' fail to show the vital part that the church plays in the lives of our rural communities.

**Expectations:** The expectations which weigh heavy upon clergy and laity alike in rural Mission Communities are a reality we need to face. But are they necessary? This session invites you to consider where changes could be made to lighten the load of expectation.

**Organisation:** If traditional ways of structuring our church life are beginning to buckle at the knees, what alternatives are there? Which model(s) will best promote the mission of the Church over the next 10 years? In this session, new options are offered for discussion.

**Vocation:** We are familiar with talking about the vocation of individuals. But do we ever consider the vocation of the community of faith, or indeed of the church building? This session encourages a different way of thinking about our resources and buildings. How can your buildings support each congregation to be the People of God, in their particular place, at this particular time?

### Using these resources

Each session has session notes for the group leader and photocopiable resource sheets.

**Videos** referred to in sessions can be downloaded or streamed online.

**2:44 cards** - this resource is available to download and print.

Both of these can be found at [www.growingtheruralchurch.org/lightening-the-load/](http://www.growingtheruralchurch.org/lightening-the-load/)

*Lord Jesus Christ, you called all who are weary and burdened to come to you, to take your yoke upon them and to learn from you, for you are gentle and humble in heart. Your yoke is easy and your burden is light, and you promise rest for our souls (from Matthew 11: 28-30).*

*In our coming to you, we pray for your gifts of gentleness and humility as we learn to share our gifts and common loads, that they may be lighter for all to carry.*

*This we ask in the name of the Son, the power of the Spirit and the loving, merciful goodness of our heavenly Father. Amen*

We hope you find this resource stimulates discussion in your Mission Community and helps you reimagine church for the future.

We may all experience the same challenges and burdens in rural ministry, but there is no 'one size fits all' set of answers.

**Be creative, be blown by the Spirit!**