

# Lightening the Load

# Celebration



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## Opening Prayer

At the beginning of each session, we encourage you to read together these comforting words from Matthew 11 and to root the conversations to come in prayer.

*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 the grace to recognise and celebrate all that is good, joyfully seeking your kingdom in all the people and the life of the communities and countryside served by our Mission Community.*

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

Amen.

### Resource list

for this session, you will need:

- flip chart paper
- post it notes
- marker pens
- biros
- copies of resource sheets
- laptop, projector and speakers (if possible)
- downloaded video or Wifi access
- 2:44 cards
- refreshments (nice biscuits!)

### Before you begin:

As people arrive, have hot drinks and nice biscuits available.

Encourage everyone to sit with people who attend a different church in your Mission Community.

On each table, provide copies of **Celebration resource sheet 1**

# A reflection

If you are able, watch together the video *“A Theological Reflection on Rural Ministry”*

If you don't have the ability to do this, an overview of the reflection is given on **Celebration resource sheet 2**. Read this slowly together. (you may wish to give everyone a copy of this reflection)

## Exercise 1: (40 minutes)

### To prepare:

On sheets of flip chart paper, write the following 5 questions and display around the room (either on individual tables, or on the wall)

**1. Which thoughts and ideas from the Theological Reflection strike a chord with you in your situation?**

**2. What aspects of daily life and church in a rural context do you find life-giving?**

**3. What grows well in the garden that is your church?**



**4. How do you see God's presence and activity in your church and community?**

**5. What three things would you most like to give thanks for and celebrate in your rural church?**  
(write ONE per post-it)

### To do the exercise:

Give each person post-it notes and a pen.

Ask them to consider the questions and write their answers on post-its. Attach these to the relevant question. They don't need to give their name.

Give the group 20 minutes to complete this part of the exercise.

Divide your group into 5 smaller groups (if you only have a small group to start with, create less smaller groups and give them more than one question to look at)

Give each group a question sheet and the attached post-its.

Are there common themes emerging?

Allow the groups 10 mins (max to discuss and then ask each to feedback briefly the common themes that they have seen (overview, rather than detail of answers))

## Measures of success (30 minutes)

Let's turn now to the main topic of this session – the burden of expectations, both how we measure “success” and the expectations placed on people.

Success is a tricky concept in the church for various reasons:

(i) success feels like something which human beings achieve, whereas in Christian ministry we depend utterly on God's grace and all that he wants to do through us. Any success is his alone. St Paul reminds us of this when he writes: *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth”* (1 Cor 3.6-7).

(ii) God's time is not our time: unlike many human tasks where you can see the fruits of your labour at the end of the day, mission is often about planting and watering seeds which may or may not come to fruition until years later.

So in one sense, we shouldn't be attempting to measure success at all, simply faithfully opening ourselves to God and all he wants to do through us in his good time. And yet, being human, we can't help measuring and being measured as to how we are doing in our parishes. The measures tend to be numerical and financial – the numbers recorded in our registers, the money we raise, the Common Fund target we hit or miss. In small rural parishes, it is all too easy to feel that, on those human measures of success, we are failing in comparison with urban churches with big numbers in both their pews and accounts.

There is another way of looking at this though – a way which can lighten the burden of expectations by broadening the ways we measure “success” in rural parishes.

**Display the following question and then brainstorm answers.** (10 minutes)

Write these on a flip chart

**The ‘success’ of rural ministry is much broader than numbers on a Sunday. How else might we measure the success of your rural mission and ministry?**

In your small groups, look at **Celebration resource sheet 3**

Discuss the questions and give answers where you can. It's fine to estimate numbers, and if you don't know the answer say so, or leave it blank. (20 mins)

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## Plan a celebration

**Use the 2:44 cards to plan a community celebration.**

This is a game and not to be taken too seriously! Every resource in **Lightening the Load** uses this game in a slightly different way.

It's a chance to have a bit of fun together, but also to apply your learning from the session. You will hopefully also find that it reveals something about working together to Lighten the Load.

**To end this session:**

Place all the cards on a table face down. Each group should send one person to choose 4 cards.

The groups then have 10 minutes to plan a community celebration that features at least 3 of the resources chosen. You may choose anything you like to celebrate, but it must be something the whole community can engage with.

**Briefly feedback the plan for your celebration.**



## A closing thought and prayer

Jesus said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10.10). God gives us the gift of life in creation; he calls us into new life through Jesus' death and resurrection; he offers us the gift of new life even now through the Holy Spirit. May we discern the signs of that new God-given life in our churches, our communities and ourselves.

*Spirit of the living Christ, come upon us in the glory of your risen power;*

*Spirit of the living Christ, come upon us in all the humility of your wondrous love;*

*Spirit of the living Christ, come upon us that new life may course within our veins,*

*new love bind us together in one family,*

*a new vision of the kingdom of God spur us on to serve you with fearless passion. Amen.*



## Celebration resource sheet 1

### **Welcome**

**Today we are going to be celebrating our ministry and communities.**

***Before we start, share good news stories from your churches...***



## Celebration resource sheet 2

### A Reflection on Rural Ministry

- **The natural connections we can make with God through the landscape, the seasons, places of re-creation.** Quite naturally in rural churches, we glimpse the hand of God the Creator in the landscape; we relate to Jesus' farming parables; we connect with the Holy Spirit through the beauty of nature. We inhabit the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, dying and then new life once again. Set-aside areas remind us of the importance of Sabbath times of re-creation and rest.
- **The depth and quality of rural community life which echoes the giving and receiving of love within God as Trinity and St Paul's image of the Body of Christ.** We know the importance of being rooted in a place – the stability that brings and the relationships that builds. We enjoy the strength of close community life and the mutual giving and receiving that enables across all age groups. We instinctively echo the life of God as we love and support our neighbour.
- **The smaller size of communities which can lead to deep relationships, creative worship and mission opportunities.** In often fragile church communities, we understand the vulnerability God embraced in the birth and death of Jesus. We know the challenges of being small in number, but also the advantages: our worship can be more intimate, we are at the heart of community life, we know our neighbours.
- **The willingness of the wider community to engage with special acts of worship.** A higher proportion of the population come to church in rural areas on a regular basis; and for funerals or festival services, there is usually a good attendance by those who don't come Sunday by Sunday. We know there is much good will from the wider community towards the church and a strong sense of being part of the church, even if their attendance is sporadic. We sense that people appreciate that the church is there praying for them.
- **The rural church's intimate relationship with its fringe, which gives a strong foundation for mission and evangelism.** Because we already know our neighbours, and because churchgoers are involved in so many aspects of community life, we already have the relationships through which we can share the Gospel in word and deed.
- **Long-standing ecumenical relationships.** We understand the importance of churches of different denominations working together and do so quite naturally – it is "ecumenism without the committees."
- **Church buildings which stand as incarnate signs of the presence of God at the heart of a community and offer a silent ministry of space and prayer.** We recognise that our church buildings are both a burden and a blessing. They stand as a symbol of God's presence, a sacred place at the heart of our day to day life, a reminder of heaven touching earth. They are quiet places of private prayer and communal places of thanksgiving, celebration or lament. Even those who do not come to church long for them to remain.

## Celebration resource sheet 3

### *Alternative measures for “success” in rural churches*

List all the local groups that your church members are involved with	
What percentage of your parishioners do you think your congregation know?	
Estimate roughly how many people your church members have supported in the community over the past year, and in what sort of ways?	
How many people come to your festival services throughout the year and what percentage of the local population is that?	
How many people have you reached this year through the occasional offices e.g. farming funerals, village weddings and baptisms?	
What other Gospel seeds have you been able to sow this year?	
Are there any instances where you feel you have seen answers to prayer or the fruits of the Spirit in action in your communities?	
How has the Coronavirus crisis changed the way you share the Gospel, and with what effect?	