

Effects of Closing a Small Rural Church

MINS 591: Research Project

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June 2007

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Introduction

This project is based on the hypothesis that the closure of a small rural church is a traumatic event in the life of the church and the surrounding community, evoking feelings of loss and grief, which if treated in a sensitive and pastoral way enables people to accept their losses while looking for new opportunities.

The central focus of the project is St James Church, Sheffield, a small rural town 50 kilometres west of Christchurch, and 13 kilometres west of Darfield, the main centre of the Malvern area. This church was previously St James Presbyterian Church and from 1979 it has been part of the Malvern Co-operating Parish, although most of the regular worshippers still think of themselves as Presbyterian.

The St James Church was opened in 1910 but is now showing the effects of its age and will soon become unsafe to use as water has seeped in behind the exterior cladding (applied in 1959), causing an unknown amount of damage to the framing timber. There are currently 8 to 12 regular worshippers, and 37 on the pastoral roll. The church will have to be closed, but some of the regulars would rather not face this fact.

Part 1 of the project sets the scene. As a way into the topic I explore some of the words of the hypothesis, e.g., church, small, rural, and consider some ways of classifying what is rural.

Part 2 is about rural New Zealand. Rural New Zealand has its own characteristics. In order to understand what is happening in Sheffield, it is important to understand the nature of a rural community. I discuss Bill Bennett's theology of the land and his rural spirituality from his book, *God of the Whenua*, together with what has happened to rural New Zealand over the last 40 years, as well as changes in the church during that time.

Part 3 focuses on Sheffield in relation to rural New Zealand. In general Sheffield reflects the rural scene throughout New Zealand, but with some local differences.

Having described Sheffield in Part 3, Part 4 is about what is happening to the church people of Sheffield as they contemplate the almost inevitable closure of their church in

the not-too-distant future. I discuss the feelings of people who have lost many businesses, services and community groups from their community. If their church closes it will be yet another blow to them.

Part 5 is about losses. People leave churches for many reasons other than the church being closed. I discuss the work of Alan Jamieson who has studied why people leave Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, but who still have a living faith in God. I also look at the experience of other churches in New Zealand and other countries when a church has been closed.

Part 6 looks at some possible opportunities after the closure of a church. What is the way ahead? There is some discussion about ways of helping people pastorally during the time of change.

Methodology

For collecting the main part of the data for this project I chose to interview most of the members of the St James Church (some were unavailable for interview). Because there are only a small number of regular worshippers at St James, Sheffield, there is a very restricted interview base, which meant that there was a risk of distortion of opinions, the sample not being big enough to detect trends. Due also to the small interview base, this project is essentially a case study. In order to try to correct the possibility of distortion and to gain a wider perspective I contacted other people in New Zealand and overseas, and have also studied literature from Australia, Canada and Britain. In addition I have interviewed some people from the Sheffield community who do not attend St James. I was given a very comprehensive summary of the Sheffield area and church from the editor of *The Malvern Record*, who has an interest in the history of the area. It would have been helpful for this project to have attendance figures for St James Church over the last 20 years, but these are not available as they are combined for statistical purposes with the numbers for the whole parish. I have spoken with the minister of the Parish during the 1980s about attendances during that decade.

I am the ordained minister of the Malvern Co-operating Parish, and there could have been a risk that the rôles of minister and researcher conflict with one another. I feel that

the people I interviewed from St James were honest and open in their responses, despite my being their minister. The research has helped me to understand the local church and surrounding community in a much deeper way than would perhaps have been possible with normal pastoral contacts. My term in the parish concludes in early 2010, and so I could very likely be the minister who has to close this church.

Part 1 Setting the Scene

The purpose of this part is to give a brief overview of the topic and of Sheffield, and to discuss the meaning of some of the words in the hypothesis as they have a major bearing on the whole project.

There are 37 names on the St James, Sheffield pastoral care list,¹ but only about eight to ten regularly attend the two monthly services. St James is a small church, not only because of the size of the building, which could hold about 60 people, but also because of the usual size of the worshipping congregation. This church is like many other rural churches scattered throughout country areas around New Zealand and around the world.

Rural areas are sometimes quite remote from urban areas – more so in countries like Canada and Australia where there may be hundreds of kilometres between isolated outback communities. New Zealand, because of its comparatively small size, doesn't have these huge distances, and so ministers don't regularly have to travel hundreds of kilometres to visit their parishioners. However some people are still several hours away from a town of any size.² In this respect rural England has more in common with rural New Zealand, as distances between communities are not great, and most rural communities are reasonably close to towns or cities.

The word "church" has several connotations. In the New Testament "Church" (*ecclesia*) includes all who are Christians. The "Church" can equally refer to a local gathering of Christians, so wherever Christians gather together that is where the church is, whether the number of worshippers is small or large. We refer to a building where Christians meet for worship as a church. What determines whether a church is large or small is not the physical size of the building, but the size of the congregation. A small church is defined as having fewer than 100 members and has a "family" feel. Most rural churches

¹ as at April 2006

² In 2004 I attended a Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conference in South Australia. One of the ministers at the conference had flown his own plane to Clare from Queensland. That is how he gets around his far-flung parish. Some other participants had driven within Australia further than we had flown from New Zealand.

and many urban churches are small churches. In a small church the minister knows everyone, and everyone knows everyone else, so no-one can “hide” in such a church.

While New Zealanders live mainly in towns and cities, there are still vast areas of rural land outside urban areas which are often referred to as country or countryside. Our roots are rural as the early settlers from mainly Britain, Scotland and Europe broke in land for pasture and crops, and built houses for themselves and their families. In a sense some of us still hanker for the rural life which we perceive as uncomplicated and free from the proverbial rat-race which plagues our cities, at least the three largest, Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Sheffield, which now has a number of types of farming, e.g., animals, crops, seed potatoes, is within commuting distance of Christchurch – about 45 minutes to the central city. This has led to a proliferation of lifestyle blocks, many of which are owned by people whose roots, and often many of their activities, are in the city. So, while the area’s population has shown some growth of recent years, church attendance has remained static or declined. While landowners on the whole are currently doing well, the church is struggling to survive, and many small churches throughout the country have had to amalgamate or close. Some of these churches have been given a new life as homes, such as the Presbyterian Church in Springfield which was closed in 1991. Mrs W told me that she locked the door of that church for the last time.³

What is rural?

Having discussed the words church and small, we now need to define the word “rural”. The International Rural Church Association defines the key aspects of being “rural” as: “relying directly or indirectly on land or sea and the vagaries of nature for livelihood, (and) living in communities of neighbours as opposed to the more urban option of communities of interest”.⁴ I agree that traditionally rural people have lived in communities of neighbours, that is apart from “lifestylers”, but it could be argued that contemporary urban dwellers do not live in communities of interest as these people don’t know their

³ Interview, 20/09/06

⁴ Item included in *Rural Network News*, no. 32, May 2006. Christchurch: Anglican Diocese of Christchurch.

neighbours as they used to even forty years ago, let alone knowing what their interests are.

George Lings, a British clergyman and author, suggests two ways of classifying what is rural or countryside.⁵ The first model is of **concentric rings**, measuring proximity to urban population centres. The second classification is by **major economic function**: *Farming* or *fishing* communities have a long history, hierarchical life with dominant families and implicit rules. *Industrial* communities are characterised by common danger, intermarriage, and now massive unemployment. *Commuter* villages have professional, articulate weekenders and little real social life. *Resort* villages are inhabited by tourists and second home owners, and social reality occurs only in the winter. *New villages* are instant mini-towns, artificially created (such as Twizel in the 1950s and the proposed town of Pegasus just to the north of Christchurch), and can suffer from social problems because of their isolation. Lings says that the two ways of looking at what is rural are broadly complementary, while the second also highlights that rural does not necessarily mean agricultural. These systems of classification may be helpful from the point of view of matching minister and parish, which is one point Lings raises. However, I also feel that such systems may be too rigid as rural communities are often composed of more than one of the categories, as is Sheffield and most other rural communities around the country. Resort villages in New Zealand are usually summer holiday venues, except for towns like Hanmer (1½ hours north-west of Christchurch) which are considered to be year-round attractions because of thermal hot pools and nearby ski field, and Methven, mainly a winter venue because of its proximity to the Mount Hutt ski field. The lifestyle blocks around New Zealand cannot on the whole be classed as agricultural, and so they would seem to fit better into the *commuter* category above. The point is made strongly in Lings' article that "the creation of fresh expressions of church needs always to be contextually aware, so different types of rural is highly important".⁶ I agree, and comment that rural parishes are more like a federation of churches than a unified parish as each rural community has its own particular characteristics. Rural parishes throughout the country differ from one another too, because of different contexts such as history, ethnic mix and types of farming. The East Coast of the North Island where Bill Bennett has spent

⁵ George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge, no. 27: The Village and Fresh Expressions*. Sheffield, England: The Sheffield Centre, Church Army's Research Unit, 2005, pp 4-5 = <http://encountersontheedge.org.uk/issues/no27.htm>

⁶ George Lings. *Encounters on the Edge, no. 27*, pp 4-5

much of his life and ministry has a large Maori population, whereas the Malvern area, indeed much of rural South Island has few Maori.

In summary ...

This chapter is a brief overview of the project and of Sheffield, as well as defining and discussing the words “small”, “church” and “rural”. Small churches have fewer than 100 members, and they are rather like a large extended family, close relationships being a common characteristic. “Rural” communities are traditionally closely knit, and again relationships are important. Rural areas differ from one another because of location, different types of farming practised, and also ethnic mix. Many New Zealanders feel some affinity with the countryside, perhaps because of the rural roots of the early settlers, both Maori and European.

Part 2

Rural New Zealand

Having set the stage in broad terms, and in order to understand Sheffield, we need to consider what rural New Zealand looks like as a whole, before focusing on Sheffield.

Bill Bennett, an Anglican clergyman who was born into a Dannevirke farming family, and who has served most of his ministry of more than 40 years in rural areas of the North Island's east coast in the Diocese of Waiapu, has published a very significant book about the rural church in New Zealand. Bennett was Ministry Enabler for the Hawke's Bay/Gisborne region for nine years, and helped establish the Hawke's Bay Rural Ministry Unit in the 1980s. In his book, *God of the Whenua*, he examines the rural community: what it is, economic factors, historical and social factors, institutions, change; and then the rural church: church communities and church loyalties, rural spirituality, the congregational profile, future trends. Bennett, while writing from the perspective of a white New Zealander (Pakeha), honours the unique theology and flavour of the Maori church. He mentions issues and developments the rural church is facing and what issues may lie ahead in the future. His study is across denominations, looking into the traditional mainline churches which still have a presence in rural New Zealand. He looks in depth at several parishes around the country and Maori districts (rohe). Bennett states that the rural church has been profoundly affected by economic and social change, and by theological and liturgical revolution in the wider church. He asks how these forces for change have affected rural New Zealand congregations, and where they are heading in the future. Bennett also offers a theology of the land for our New Zealand setting, and also a theology of mission and ministry for all who minister in rural areas. His work in these areas is worth mentioning, as we have to think theologically in the church alongside working things out practically, even though many church people probably have little grasp of what thinking theologically is all about. It may help the St James' folk to move ahead concerning closing their church if they could think theologically by asking such questions as, What is God saying to us about our future mission in our locality?

Bennett's theology of the land is based on the work of Walter Brueggemann who focuses on the Old Testament, and the relationships between God, the Hebrew people

and the land. The children of Israel journeyed from Egypt to reach the *gifted and promised land*, land promised to Abraham. The Abrahamic *covenant* (Gen. 17:1-8) was initiated and offered by God to Abraham and his descendents, and is constantly restated throughout the Old Testament. The fulfilment of this covenant is repeatedly compromised by the people's inability to keep their part of the covenant, which led to a circular pattern of *land acquisition* and *land loss* (Deut. 11:26-28). Possessing the land is both a privilege and a huge responsibility. Brueggemann's final point is that the *experience of landlessness is a wilderness experience*. It is during these experiences that the Israelites rediscovered that God is with them and that he suffers with them. Jesus often used images and metaphors taken from the land in his parables.

Bennett also uses the work of Geoffrey R Lilburne, an Australian theologian who draws on New Testament tradition and Australian Aboriginal culture. In the New Testament land is no longer central to people's relationship with God. The *kingdom of God* is not geographical, but is instead a relational dynamic with the Church. *Place* (from the Jewish tradition) is superseded by *space* (e.g., John 4:21, 23). Modern people, says Bennett, live without links to the land and do not identify with a particular place. In my experience most of us remember our birthplace as something important when thinking of our roots and where we belong. For the Maori people their mana (standing, identity) comes from their tribe and their ancestry. Our place of birth is on our birth certificate. The longer a person has lived in a particular place, especially if it is a rural area, the more one is looked on as a "local". We also generally identify with the country of our birth – especially when our sports teams do well! So our identity and our belonging are related to both a community and a place.⁷ Bob Hall, addressing a rural churches' seminar in Southland in 1979 said:

"Rural community ... is something which exists more clearly in our minds and in our imaginations than it does out there on the ground. It involves an interweaving of people and places, shared experiences, bonds of kinship, and economic links. Rural community transcends and defies geographical boundaries; rural community is made up of a whole series of overlapping groups:

⁷ Bill Bennett. *God of the Whenua: Rural Ministry in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing Ltd, 2005, pp 58-68

each group meets face to face; each group has a slightly different centre of gravity; each group has a different set of boundaries.”⁸

This confirms that rural communities are complex (as are urban communities), and this is why they don't fit neatly into Lings' classifications, nor into the International Rural Church Association's definition which suggests that rural people live in communities of neighbours. That may have been, but is not so now, with the lifestylers who are not really part of the rural community.

In a second chapter on his theology of the land, subtitled “Theology and Kiwi Culture”, Bennett considers both Maori and Pakeha views of the land. For Maori the land embodies the soul of the tribe, the realm of ancestors, and it is from the land that they derive their identity, their mana and their sense of belonging and place. Land cannot be separated from their spirituality and their customs, and it determines the pulse and well-being of the people. The New Zealand-European view of the land is very different. While some regard the land from a Judeo-Christian heritage, others have a more utilitarian view of the land. It can be bought and sold, and a living can be made from it. Bennett believes that time and seasonality are key ingredients in a theology of the land. There is also, for New Zealand-European people, a strong and increasing sense of accountability for the use of the land, the sharing of its resources, and the responsible care of the environment, hence the contemporary emphasis on sustainability. A question arises: If Bennett had spent most of his life in the Malvern area instead of the North Island's East Coast where there is a large Maori population, would there be as much emphasis on Maori viewpoints as very few Maori live in Malvern?

Working or farming the land today is as much about sustainability as productivity and profitability so that both present and future owners can enjoy the bounty the land produces. Bennett observes that farming is a unique partnership with the land and the harvesting of its resources, whether the harvest is in shearing or killing animals or harvesting a crop.⁹ Farming calls for a great variety of skills, the acquisition of which takes many years, but which is today assisted by science and technology. Land use is increasingly varied today and is dependent on factors such as types of soil and

⁸ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 90

⁹ Bennett, “Farmland Faith”, An Occasional Paper distributed in 2003, p. 3

availability of irrigation (especially for dairy farming). Diversification permits greater sustainability.

Bennett gave this description of rural spirituality to a rural ministry seminar in 2002: "The processes by which those who live on and by the land discern meaning and purpose for creation and for themselves, whether as community or as individuals".¹⁰ Certainly rural people have a special relationship with the land as it is from the land that they derive their livelihood. They tend to think seasonally rather than from day to day as urban folk are more likely to do. The lifestylers view land as an investment and an economic resource, and as a place for perhaps a few livestock or the children's ponies. They are not tied to the land, a fact demonstrated in the fairly rapid change of ownership, often within 3 years¹¹, whereas the traditional farmers are often descendents of the people who broke in the land for farming, up to five generations back. Horticulturalists are different again, and regard their land as part of the raw materials required to produce saleable products. Urban dwellers have similarities to horticulturalists and lifestylers as they regard land as place on which to put a house to live in or to rent out, and as an investment which hopefully produces a capital gain when it is sold.

In a research report for the Selwyn District Council Cook and Fairweather found, contrary to Bennett's statement on tenure of lifestyle blocks, that the average stay was 10.07 years.¹² Further, they found that "as a group smallholders had a lot of involvement with community groups and organisations",¹³ particularly sports clubs, church and school organisations, although most of the churchgoing smallholders attended church in Christchurch,¹⁴ a fact which I also found. They confirm that many smallholders appear to be living a very urban life in the country, and tend to rely on income from employment in the city to support their households.¹⁵ The wide difference between Bennett's and Cook and Fairweather's figures could be explained by the fact that Bennett records a general comment from land agents, while the research done for the Selwyn District Council has

¹⁰ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 85

¹¹ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 21. On average, New Zealand residential properties change hands every six years.

¹² Andrew J. Cook and John R. Fairweather. *Smallholding in the Selwyn District: Research Report for the Selwyn District Council*. Lincoln: Agribusiness and Economics Research Unit, Lincoln University, May 2005, p. 8

¹³ Cook and Fairweather. *Smallholding in the Selwyn District*, p. 35

¹⁴ Cook and Fairweather. *Smallholding in the Selwyn District*, p. 10

¹⁵ Cook and Fairweather. *Smallholding in the Selwyn District*, p. 37

a much wider base.¹⁶ Further, Cook and Fairweather's survey covered "smallholdings" of between 1 and 40 hectares (2.5 to 100 acres).¹⁷ The lower end of this group, i.e., up to about 4 hectares (10 acres) could realistically be termed "lifestyle blocks", and this, along with allowance for regional variations, would largely account for differences in length of ownership of rural residential blocks.

In his theology of mission Bennett begins by stating that "we are called to live out and declare the way of Christ within the context of our daily work," whatever our daily work may be – as farmers, contractors, members of our family, neighbours, teachers, shop assistants, agricultural servicing industry personnel, lifestylers, and so on. Our lifestyle should be based on Christian principles such as fellowship, care, loving concern for neighbours, and also being good stewards of God's creation. Our faith communities should be energised and empowered by the presence of the living God, as we so that we demonstrate our faith within the wider community. This is an every-member ministry which everyone can do. It is not dependent on professional clergy, although clergy are part of this ministry to the wider community by the work they themselves do, and by encouraging the church people in their daily lives and work to be Christ to others. As there are increasingly fewer clergy, the future of the church, especially the rural church, will be very much dependent on local folk "being the church" seven days a week.

Small rural churches don't have the impact they once had in their communities when more people attended church, yet individual Christians can and should show the love of Christ in their daily lives (as Mrs H said they should be doing¹⁸) but it is difficult for a small group to show kingdom relationships between themselves. The average attendance at St James Church, Sheffield, is 8-10, some of whom don't live in the immediate Sheffield area, which means the impact these people have in the community is very limited. Jesus left twelve apostles (including Paul) to evangelise the whole world, so, while a small rural church may have a very limited impact on the surrounding community, the task is not impossible if the people are able and willing to refocus on mission instead of survival.

¹⁶ 492 usable responses

¹⁷ Cook and Fairweather. *Smallholding in the Selwyn District*, p. vi

¹⁸ Interview, 20/09/06

Bill Bennett¹⁹ says that we call the people who live outside of urban areas “country folk”, but there are many varieties of country folk. New Zealand’s rural communities are as diverse as its urban communities (if there is much sense of urban “community” today). Rural communities are comprised of four main groups of people: the land owners (individuals, partnerships or corporates), farm managers including share milkers, employees or contractors, and rural servicing industries such as accountants, contractors (of many varieties), veterinarians, stock and station agents, many of whom may be based in larger centres. School teachers and clergy are also a “service” to rural communities, but are usually regarded as transient, as are the comparatively recent phenomenon of “lifestylers” who are known colloquially as “hobby farmers”. The lifestylers, according to Mrs H, take little interest in the local community,²⁰ and comments are heard about “dusty headers and balers” which show an aversion towards traditional farming.²¹ The Rev. Hugh Paterson remarked that the lifestylers are “a different sort of population” as they “don’t know the local traditions”.²²

Traditionally it has been the local farmers who have attended and supported the rural church.²³ Many of these have now died or left the area, or are working longer hours as few farmers employ labour, and so church and its activities take second or third place. Lifestylers either don’t go to church, or continue to attend their city church, which makes it difficult for small rural churches to grow. Numbers attract numbers, which means that larger city or suburban churches are likely to grow at the expense of small rural churches, especially if they are within easy commuting distance of town. Further, small churches cannot compete with the range of activities and programmes for children and youth which large churches offer. All this disadvantages rural and small churches.

Change and restructuring have affected the lives and psyche of New Zealanders over the past three decades.²⁴ New Zealanders have become increasingly aware of and familiar with change during this time. However there has been, and still is, a degree of

¹⁹ Bennett, “Farmland Faith”, p. 2

²⁰ Interview, 20/09/06

²¹ Interview with Mr F B, 30/11/06

²² Interview, 13/12/06

²³ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, editor, *The Malvern Record*, Nov. 2006

²⁴ See, for example, R. LeHeron and R. Pawson, *Changing Places in New Zealand*. Auckland: Longman, 1996.

cynicism and tiredness with restructuring and change, borne out of the painful experiences of the community of redundancies and a suspicion that some of the changes have simply been for the sake of change. Our contemporary Western society is characterised by an increasingly rapid rate of change. Bill Bennett observes that the rural church has been profoundly affected by the economic and social changes in the nation, as well as the theological and liturgical revolution in the wider church.²⁵

Rural communities throughout the country have been greatly affected by government policies as well as external factors. From the 1950s to the early 1980s agriculture was New Zealand's main export earner, and up until the 1970s New Zealanders experienced a good standard of living. Most of our agricultural products (meat and wool) were purchased by Britain. In 1972 Britain joined the Common Market, and New Zealand suddenly had to find new markets on the international stage. With the two "oil shocks" of the 1970s our production and distribution costs rose because of the distance from our markets. Changes had to be made, especially in our farming and farm servicing areas, to make our export prices competitive in a global market. In the first half of the 1980s inflation was rampant and overseas borrowings high, but unemployment was low. Farmers struggled with high interest rates. With the privatisation of government departments and reduction of staff numbers in the state and private sectors to produce a leaner and more efficient workforce there was a huge increase in unemployment.

Since the early 1980s the farming scene has changed dramatically. Supplementary Minimum Payments (SMPs) for meat, wool and dairy products were introduced by the National government after a disastrous collapse in wool prices in the 1966-67 season.²⁶ The Muldoon government of the 1970s and early 1980s added incentive subsidies on chemicals and fertilisers. These subsidies were introduced to increase farm production by paying farmers a minimum price for their produce, and to cushion the farming sector from international instability. The downside was that this created a false situation. As part of Labour's "Rogernomics" reforms these subsidies and SMPs were removed in one fell swoop in the mid-1980s, resulting in a devastating effect on farmers' incomes. Aerial topdressing firms disappeared almost overnight. The Lange government decided that

²⁵ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. v

²⁶ Peter Cross, ed. *New Zealand Agriculture: A Story of the Past 150 Years*. Auckland: New Zealand Rural Press Ltd, 1990

both rural and industrial sectors should face up to global economic realities.²⁷ Mr F B remarked that Labour had not thought far enough ahead and were just trying to “get capitalist farmers sorted”.²⁸ He said that Federated Farmers had told Roger Douglas (Finance Minister) that it would be more sensible to take the subsidies off over five years and remove manufacturers’ tariffs over the same period. It was not an easy time.²⁹ At the same time the New Zealand dollar was floated. Marginal farms went under, while the big farmers survived. Less fertiliser meant lower stock numbers as there was no grass (NZ’s 72 million sheep dropped to 39 million). However, tariffs and licensing remained, meaning that it cost more to manufacture some commodities in NZ than to import them from overseas (e.g., baling twine³⁰).

In the 1990s the National government removed tariffs and farming started to recover. Even during that decade farmers still found it tight financially, and were not able to maintain or replace equipment or retain staff. 60% of the country’s GDP was from agriculture, and any restrictions in this area had a huge effect on the national economy. Mr F B said it was estimated that for every farm worker out of a job twelve downstream lost their jobs.³¹ The 1990s were hard years for farmers, with some farmers selling off land to make their farms viable. Plant and equipment were often not replaced. On top of all this, natural disasters hit the country, e.g., Cyclone Bola, droughts and severe snow storms (the latest in June 2006). Many farmers shed staff, and some had to leave their land, often through mortgagee sales, and some of these people still have bitter memories. Some, unable to cope with the massive changes forced upon them, committed suicide. Those that survived that decade are now much stronger. The amalgamation of local councils in the early 1990s released large tracts of land for subdivision. Much of this land was split up into small holdings, e.g., lifestyle blocks.³² However, since 1999 a good recovery of the farming sector has been experienced, with 2001 onwards seeing the best returns for years for some farmers. The economic debate

²⁷ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 15

²⁸ Quoted in unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Mr F B told me that to prove this point he imported baling twine from Australia, and sold it to other farmers for cheaper than the locally produced product – interview, 30/11/06. Fencing wire produced in New Zealand under the tariff system was 35% dearer than the imported product. “Donaghy’s (wire manufacturers) made a killing.”

³¹ Mr F B, past president of local Federated Farmers, in unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

³² Interview with The Rev. Hugh Paterson, former vicar of Malvern Anglican Parish, 13/12/06

is now about globalisation and issues around free trade and countries to which we sell produce which still have protectionist policies.³³ This is a challenge for primary producers, particularly as we are distant from many of our markets, and we are now vulnerable to what is termed “green miles” – the amount of energy expended and the effect on the atmosphere in getting our products to the markets.

In the last two decades there have been rapid technological advances along with seven-day shopping (now the norm) and several major health and education restructurings. We are a small economy and therefore are very vulnerable to international events, such as the Asian financial crisis of 1998. We are also now very much part of a competitive international economy.

The church since the latter half of the 1960s has undergone marked theological change, beginning with the Lloyd Geering heresy trial in 1967, after he had publicly denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus.³⁴ In the early 1970s a plan for union between five denominations failed to gain acceptance in the churches, and since then, while union and co-operating churches (generally known as CVs – Co-operating Ventures) have been set up, no more formal moves to unite the churches have been taken. These CVs have been often set up in rural areas in the hope that this would save the rural churches, and allow parishes to retain full-time ordained ministry. This has turned out not to be the case, and now many rural parishes are struggling to meet the significant costs associated with ordained ministry. A number have opted for part-time ordained ministry, or shared ministry with another parish, or to lay ministry teams. (We will comment further on this in Part 6.)

George Lings suggests that the chief change in the rural church is the reduction of ordained clergy, along with other factors such as ordinations not keeping pace with retirements despite non-stipendiary ministry and use of retired clergy, and depopulation playing their part in the decline of the rural church. Lings states that “to some extent, the rural church has been expiring of expectations that could not be fulfilled.”³⁵ While Lings is British, the picture is similar in New Zealand. In both countries the traditional image of a church is “parson, parish and building”, but this is increasingly unsustainable in today’s

³³ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 4

³⁴ At that time Lloyd Geering was a professor at the Presbyterian Theological Hall in Dunedin.

³⁵ Lings, *The Village and Fresh Expressions*, p. 9

church, both rural and urban. Rural churches are finding it difficult to attract clergy. In 2005 the New Zealand Methodist Conference did not have ministers available for five significant Methodist churches. Chris Bedford believes that rural ministry is the poor relation in both the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, however unintentionally.³⁶ I agree, and suggest also that CVs are further down the priority list. The Methodist projections about ordained ministers state that about 55 of out of 125 currently stationed presbyters will retire in the next five years, and that another fifteen will retire in the following five years. This means that the Methodist church cannot conduct all of its church life in the ways of the recent past.³⁷ The Presbyterian statistics are similar, except that there are more ministers, but as with the Methodists many more are retiring or leaving ministry than are being trained. All this has an impact on rural parishes, as, given the choice, ministers often opt for urban parishes over rural charges, especially if they have children or a working spouse. It used to be the pattern that new ministers were appointed to rural parishes, but they left after a time to go to a town or city parish where educational and other opportunities for children, such as sport and music, were better, and so rural ministry was thought of, perhaps implicitly, as second-class ministry³⁸ or a training ground for new ministers. The two ministers who preceded me at Malvern had both come straight from ministry training. Both moved to a suburban parish from Malvern. With the advent of Rural Ministry Units some ministers are regarding rural ministry as a specialist ministry. However, many rural parishes cannot afford ordained ministers on a full or even part-time stipend.

Bill Bennett mentions a liturgical revolution in the wider church. He is writing from an Anglican background, and has seen the introduction of the New Zealand Prayer Book. Other denominations, such as Presbyterian and Methodist are not so dependent on set liturgies and so have not been as much affected by liturgical change, although the charismatic movement of the 1970s and '80s did have an impact on worship styles in that there has been more lay leadership and participation in services, along with contemporary worship styles which are led by worship leadership teams and are not so dependent on clergy, and modern music which has either replaced or is sung in addition to traditional hymns. These changes are perhaps not seen so much in rural churches

³⁶ The Rev. Chris Bedford. "Rural Ministers: Outstanding in Their Field", in *Rural Network News*, no. 33, October 2006, p. 3

³⁷ Editorial, Ministry e-newsletter, Methodist Church of NZ, March 2007

³⁸ Bedford, "Rural Ministers", p. 3

due to appropriate musicians not being as plentiful or as available as they are in urban churches. Bennett observes that by and large rural church worship is the activity of older people with few children, young marrieds or young families.³⁹ This is certainly the case in Sheffield, where I am usually the youngest person in the church on a Sunday. Mrs W who came to the district eight years ago said that she has not seen children in church.⁴⁰ In Darfield the Baptist and Pentecostal churches have good numbers of younger people. The Baptist church has a fulltime youth pastor, and a lively youth group.

I asked an elder of the Baptist church why children and young families attend that church.⁴¹ He said that there are several factors: over the past six years they have invested in a full-time youth pastor which has meant young people feel included in the church; multi-generational worship, with children present for some of the service; a good quality children's programme – most of the parents of these children attend church; home groups – probably the most significant factor of all. He agrees that a "critical mass" is required for effective and lasting youth work, as well as for under 40s – (numbers breed numbers.) The hardest part is getting that "critical mass" to begin with.

In summary ...

Bill Bennett's book, *God of the Whenua*, is a significant study of the rural church in New Zealand. He has developed a theology of the land, in particular from a Kiwi perspective, stating differences between Maori and New Zealand-European attitudes to land and land use. In his theology of mission he states that all Christians are "called to live out and declare the way of Christ within the context of our daily work", but rural churches are finding that increasingly difficult because of their small membership today. The rural communities and churches have been seriously affected by both rural depopulation and repopulation.

Not all the people who live in rural areas today are "rural" people. The "lifestylers" are basically urban folk who live in the country. Their roots, work and social life are in town, and so they don't get involved in the rural communities in whose area they live. There are some tensions between the lifestylers and traditional farmers.

³⁹ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 33

⁴⁰ Interview, 20/09/06

⁴¹ Phone conversation with Mr B K, 11/04/07

The church has seen marked changes in theology and worship forms over the last thirty years, but the chief change in the rural church is the reduction in the number of ordained clergy. Alternative forms of ministry are being tried, but the pattern of an ordained minister to a parish is deeply ingrained. The Rural Ministry Units are helping ministers to regard rural ministry as a career choice, rather than rural churches being used as a “training ground” for new ministers until they can get an urban parish appointment.

We have seen how government policies along with external factors have affected rural communities drastically. The church has not been untouched by all of these.

Part 3

Sheffield in Relation to Rural New Zealand

We now turn to Sheffield where St James Church, the central focus for this project, is situated. If we are to understand how to help people cope with yet another loss when the church is closed, we need to understand the changes that have occurred in this rural community and in the church.

The general New Zealand scenario is replicated in the local context of Sheffield. In terms of Lings' classification models, Sheffield is a mixture of *Farming* and *Commuter*. There are also permanent residents in the township. The present businesses in Sheffield are Taege's Engineering, Sheffield Caterers (famous for their pies), and a service station which also houses the private post boxes. The Sheffield School (opened in 1949) took pupils from Waddington, Annat and Russells Flat schools, all of which were then closed. There are two churches: Anglican and Presbyterian. There is also a hotel (which, although it has a regular patronage, has experienced a downturn since "smokefree" legislation, and is currently up for sale), and a hall which is used very little now. It is difficult to attract young people onto the hall committee. The Sheffield Pavilion which used to be considered as the heart of Sheffield is a combined sports pavilion (built by the combined sports bodies) so it is often used for rugby, cricket and show days as well as for other meetings and functions. The telephone exchange was automated in 1977, with some staff moving to Darfield before that exchange was also automated about 1978. The Post Office closed in 1978, and then it became a general store. When that closed the building housed a bakery and caterer. (The Post Office and telephone exchange provided employment for about 11 people.) There is little social life in Sheffield now as many local sports teams such as hockey, netball and cricket have been centralised with Darfield and elsewhere (e.g., Kirwee, Ellesmere and Greendale). However, the Bowling Club is very active, as is Sheffield Rugby which has several teams. Mr F B told me that there are now few local "characters", but he's not sure why.⁴²

Taege Engineering is a large business in Sheffield. It was originally Taege and Holliday, rural engineer and baling contractors. The baling part of the business was sold seventeen years ago to an independent contractor, and now the next generation runs

⁴² Interview, 30/11/06

the engineering business. I asked the present director, Keith Taege, what keeps him in Sheffield. He told me that he has a well-established clientele in the area. His brother operates an engineering company in Christchurch, and Keith said he can do things cheaper than his brother. In fact, his brother sometimes brings work out to Sheffield. Keith remarked that government compliance costs could shut him down in three years or so.⁴³

In the mid-1980s when the demographics of the school population and community were being surveyed, it was found that the Sheffield community was 30% farming, 30% contractors and those servicing the rural community, e.g., service stations, and engineers. The remaining 40% were township people either retired or working elsewhere. It is thought that the present demographic spread is about the same, except perhaps for a slight increase in the township numbers, although there have been only four new houses built in Sheffield since 1989.⁴⁴ Any increase has been small as retired people tend to move to Darfield where there are more and better facilities, such as shopping, medical centre, library, Post Shop and bank⁴⁵, bowls and senior citizens groups. (Previously there was a good library in Sheffield.)

The backbone of the Sheffield area is farming, traditionally arable (grain and seeds), Sheffield being the second largest potato seed growing area in New Zealand after Pukekohe in South Auckland. There is a large seed cleaning company in Darfield. Seeds grown now include specialist crops such as carrot, radish, etc. Grass is more likely to be made in balage and silage compared to hay. In the 1980s there were no dairy units in Sheffield, and until the 1990s the main farming production, alongside grain and seed, was from sheep and beef, with a couple of pig units.⁴⁶ Bill Bennett says that one response to change in rural areas has been to diversify. While some farmers in the North Island sold their land to forestry companies, this did not happen in the South Island. In fact the Selwyn Plantation Board has converted some large areas of land from forestry to pasture in the last couple of years. Planting has been relocated to hill country where there is better rainfall and less wind. The diversification of farming has meant many new

⁴³ Interview, 15/03/07

⁴⁴ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁴⁵ One business person at Darfield said that businesses are reluctant to bank with Kiwibank – they want a “real” bank. (Trustbank [Westpac] and BNZ formerly had branches at Darfield.)

⁴⁶ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

enterprises: farm stays, adventure and eco-tourism, hobby industries, berries, grapes, citrus fruit and avocados.⁴⁷ The most popular forms of diversification in Canterbury are farm stays, tourism, conversion to dairy farming, and subdivision into lifestyle blocks.

Rural areas have gone through a period of depopulation because of the changes outlined. One result of this depopulation in the 1980s and '90s was an outflow of people from rural communities, many of whom had been community leaders and were people of wisdom and experience. Lloyd Vidler⁴⁸ confirmed this situation in an email to me (31/08/06) commented that in Western Victoria where he spent eleven years he noticed the impact of the closure of schools, hospitals and banks. One of the effects was the removal of people from the community who had some of the leadership skills required by the local community and church. The new generation of farmers usually has a tertiary qualification and perhaps overseas experience in other cultural and work environments.⁴⁹ In addition, many rural communities now include people on benefits, as the cost of housing and land is cheaper, but the cost of living is higher because of distance from a large centre and higher prices for everyday commodities. Rental accommodation is not necessarily cheaper than in Christchurch, except for places which are further away from the township. People who have moved out from town also experience the isolating effect of distance from family and friends in urban areas.⁵⁰ This situation is reflected in Sheffield, where about 40% of the people in the area are township people, either retired or working in town.⁵¹ Sheffield township does not have many young people as they leave the area for tertiary education or for work opportunities and seldom return as their qualifications are not marketable in rural areas. This means that rural residents' families are often in the city, or a larger rural town.

Rural depopulation has affected the churches too. Bedford comments that the movement of people to towns, the increased size of farms and reduced requirements for farm labour have dramatically reduced the size of rural communities. This downturn

⁴⁷ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 21

⁴⁸ A minister with the Uniting Church of Australia, and first chairperson of the International Rural Church Association (originally the International Rural Church Ecumenical Association, established 1998)

⁴⁹ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 21

⁵⁰ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 22

⁵¹ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

affects the church.⁵² Key leaders have left the area, and giving patterns have changed as “farming” families were more likely to be involved in the church and support it financially than “township” families.⁵³ Given the tenacity of rural people to survive changes, they are usually determined to retain a church presence in their area. “Many of the stalwarts of rural churches are long-time residents who accept, and may be welcome, change in their farming and business practices. However they have difficulty accepting change in the church.”⁵⁴ Church groups and support networks have been hit by the changes as well. For example, Sheffield Young Wives which was under the auspices of the Anglican church, had a membership of about 40 in the late 1970s, but by the mid-1980s it had ceased as there were few new members coming into the area.⁵⁵ The traditional ministry model of a resident clergy person in each area has also become financially impossible for many rural parishes, which has led to new ways of doing the work of the church. Lay people have had to become more involved, and ministry is often sourced from a larger centre. Since December 2006 there has been no resident Catholic priest at Darfield, although this is mainly due to the restructuring of the Christchurch Diocese because of the shortage of priests. The church in Sheffield has suffered too from depopulation, as the remaining folk are reluctant to take up office in the church and its groups – most of them have “been there, done that”.⁵⁶

Many farmers now don't employ resident farm workers, which means that their cottages are vacant or let out. In some cases sons have moved in and taken over the farm. With few married couples employed on farms now there are fewer children in the district.⁵⁷ Instead contractors are hired for certain tasks, especially those which require large outlays for equipment, such as sowing crops, heading, baling and spreading fertiliser, or farmers have updated their own machinery and so have become more self-sufficient. Because of more modern machinery farming is now less labour intensive, but the down side is that camaraderie has been destroyed. More modern equipment has led to the average age of farmers being older, although they've had to continue doing heavy work, which has affected the health of some.⁵⁸ Some farmers do contracting in addition to their

⁵² Bedford, “Rural Ministers”, p. 3

⁵³ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁵⁴ Bedford, “Rural Ministers”, p. 3

⁵⁵ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁵⁶ Interview, Mrs H., 20/09/06

⁵⁷ Interview, Mr and Mrs D B, 31/08/06

⁵⁸ Bennett, “Farmland Faith”, p. 6

own work to supplement their income. For the same reason some farmers' wives or partners work away from the farm and so are not available to assist with the day to day work or get involved in church or community activities. Dairy grazers from the West Coast and further afield are an option now for a winter supplementary income, and the local dairy industry now established provides an outlet for balage which is sold either baled or standing.⁵⁹ Irrigation is from deep wells, with dairy farms requiring far more water and chemicals than sheep farms.⁶⁰ A question being widely asked is: How sustainable is dairy farming, given that it requires so much irrigation and application of chemicals, which leads to run-off problems, and polluted waterways and underground water sources? These are issues that rural communities are currently facing, but with land so much cheaper than in the North Island, dairy farmers are moving south.

The Sheffield community is quite tightly knit, as has traditionally been the case with rural communities. The advent of lifestyle blocks has resulted in a population increase (rural repopulation). Lifestyle blocks are increasingly common (a widespread phenomenon throughout the country). The "lifestylers" generally retain their city links (work, school, sport, friends) and do not always participate in the local community. Lifestyle blocks tend to change hands about every 3 years on average⁶¹, which is part of the reason that the owners don't get involved in the local community – they're not there long enough to bother getting involved.⁶² So, while the rural population has increased somewhat because of the lifestyle blocks, the community life has not been enhanced, and there is sometimes tension between traditional farmers and lifestylers as the latter do not understand or appreciate the noise or smells of animals.⁶³ Mr F B said that on the whole the lifestylers are anti-traditional farming with its "dusty headers and balers".⁶⁴ The English experience is similar, where tensions are evident between those who traditionally regard the countryside as their own and their work place, and the new

⁵⁹ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁶⁰ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁶¹ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 21 – but see report to Selwyn District Council, mentioned earlier re length of tenure on smallholdings.

⁶² It remains to be seen what high petrol/diesel prices will do to the "lifestylers". Will lifestyle blocks be less attractive as commuting becomes increasingly expensive?

⁶³ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, tells a story (p. 21) of a lifestyler moving the next-door farmer's cows as the smell was not conducive to the atmosphere for his barbeque.

⁶⁴ Interview, 30/11/06

arrivals.⁶⁵ The chairman of the South Canterbury JRC (Joint Regional Committee) said their experience is that the dairy farmers are newcomers to the area and keep very much to themselves. A report by the Commission for Rural Communities states that in 2006 over 105,000 people moved from urban to rural areas (in Britain), continuing a pattern of urban to rural migration that has major consequences for the future of the countryside.⁶⁶ This shows that rural repopulation is not just a New Zealand phenomenon, and also that it has major implications for rural communities and, according to the Commission, for governments as well, especially about issues such as sustainability and difficulties facing the less well off in our rural communities.⁶⁷

The Sheffield community still gets behind local projects. There is a lively Garden Club (90 members⁶⁸) and a very active volunteer fire brigade which was described as “the backbone of the community”. The firemen, Mrs P remarked, are “real gentlemen” who will go out of their way to help others.⁶⁹ Is the fire brigade meeting men’s needs which were formerly provided by local sports teams, *viz.* cohesion, integration and involvement? Is it the sole survivor of men’s community organizations in Sheffield? Has it replaced the church as the centre of the community? After a space of about 20 years local Anzac Day services were reinstated in 2006.⁷⁰ This may reflect an upsurge in attendance nationally at Anzac Day services over recent years as well as a local feeling about their own war dead. I wonder if this is part of a new “spirituality” (replacing the churches?), or a searching for our national roots or identity or “nationhood”, or perhaps looking for role models apart from sports or television personalities.

In order to get a fuller background of the Sheffield community I approached Mrs Denise Scott who has lived in the area for about 25 years, and who is the editor of the *Malvern Record*, one of the two free local weekly newspapers. She wrote very comprehensively for me about the area in general, as well as about Playcentre, Plunket, Young Wives

⁶⁵ The Archbishops’ Commission on Rural Areas. *Faith in the Countryside*. Worthing, West Sussex, England: ACORA, 1990, p. v

⁶⁶ Commission for Rural Communities. “Is the Countryside Sustainable? State of the Countryside 2006 Report” = www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk, downloaded 05/03/07

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ *The Malvern Record*, Issue no. 2555, 24 April 2007

⁶⁹ Interview, 30/11/06

⁷⁰ 120 people attended the service there this year

group, and she also recorded comments from a previous president of Federated Farmers whom I subsequently interviewed.

Playcentre was the largest social gathering place for women, parents and pre-school children in the Sheffield Community. At its height there were 2 to 4 sessions per week. It provided parent education with many speakers organised, and around 30 parents attending monthly meetings. Playcentre was held in the supper room of the hall and eventually closed in 2004 when it combined with Darfield. Dropping off children to places like preschools and kindergarten has become more the norm, as parent and family self-support networks have diminished drastically because of more women working away from the farm or local community. This means that social networks have decreased – a real change for the traditional rural community which placed high value on close relationships.⁷¹

Plunket, an organization to support mothers and babies, has much diminished services when compared with the late 1980s and 1990s. In the 1970s and '80s the Plunket Nurse visited the new Mum and baby at home fortnightly from birth to three months, followed by three monthly visits at the local clinic till age two, then annually till 4 years old. Now there are usually only two home visits after the first six weeks and frequency at clinics is much less, all adding up to less 'overseeing', support and care of new babies and new parents. Toy Libraries began in the 1990s as an arm of Plunket and while most of these in Malvern are still a part of Plunket, a few have opted to become incorporated societies to have a more proactive approach to the management of funds within their area. They are providing a vital social point of contact and therefore a peer education option for parents and children, and have replaced other gatherings and groups. Such support is vital because more often than not young families don't have any immediate family living in the near vicinity.⁷²

The church in Sheffield is represented by two denominations, Anglican and Presbyterian. The Anglican church, St Ambrose, which is part of the Malvern Anglican Parish, is built of permanent materials, replacing an earlier wooden church. The Presbyterian Church, St James, is part of a complex parish, the Malvern Co-operating

⁷¹ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁷² From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

Parish. St James' Church was built in 1910, and had a weatherboard cladding. There are some people who want the building to remain in use until its centenary. Nicholas Hawkes, an Australian church researcher and author, comments that rural people are particularly resilient and will resist closure even when numbers are low, because the church building is considered sacred, not just in the traditional sense, but in their being significant in defining people's identity and history, as well as being a place for worship.⁷³ Yes, rural people do demonstrate resilience when it comes to change, and small numbers don't seem to worry them, either in their communities or in their churches. This trait can also be a negative force, as people will resist change to stay with the familiar traditions or habits of the past. In past years the church may have defined people's history and identity, but this is not so to the same extent now because of comparatively small numbers associated with churches, and even smaller numbers attending worship. For these people, their history and identity is defined by the church, but also probably by other factors such as the length of time they've lived in the area, and what positions they've held in the community.⁷⁴ Both the Anglican and Presbyterian churches have an adjacent hall built of permanent materials, St James' Sunday School having been opened in February 1958, with toilets added 20 years later. There used to be two Sunday Schools in Sheffield.⁷⁵ Both churches also had a clergy house. St James' manse was sold in the mid-1980s, and the previous Anglican vicar bought the vicarage and still lives there since he retired 4 years ago. Until the formation of the Malvern Co-operating Parish in 1979, the Malvern Presbyterian minister lived in the manse at the rear of the Sheffield church.

The exterior of St James' Church was roughcasted in 1960. The roughcasting is now regarded as unsatisfactory as it was not properly sealed, particularly around the window frames, which has allowed water to seep in. This has caused rot in the timber structure, which is a major reason for the building's deterioration. The Malvern Co-operating Parish Council decided in 2005 not to spend any major money on the building, having received a quote of approximately \$17,000 for work on what can be seen without removing any cladding. The last baptisms in St James were in 1994, and the last two weddings in 1993

⁷³ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different: Ministry and Hope for Rural Australia*. Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1995, p. 4

⁷⁴ Mrs H., interviewed 20/09/06, has lived in Sheffield most of her life, returning there in 1958, and joining the Presbyterian Church soon after.

⁷⁵ Interview, Mr & Mrs P, 30/11/06

and 2003 (both from one family). Mr and Mrs P said that their younger two daughters were married at Trinity Church in Darfield as it is larger and more accessible for out-of-town folk than St James.⁷⁶

Since 2001 there have been 3 regular services per month, two led by the minister, and one by a lay preacher from the wider parish or from outside. In 2005 the Sheffield people agreed that, because of the cost of bringing in a lay preacher from Christchurch, they would forgo their own service on the second Sunday of the month, and combine with the local Anglicans at St Ambrose. This worked well for a year, with everyone enjoying worshipping together once a month as a larger group, and a Sunday School was begun, which has been getting a good response from local families. In late 2006 the Anglican vestry changed their preaching schedule, cutting out the morning service on the 2nd Sunday and replacing it with an evening service. The local folk, both Anglican and Presbyterian, regret this decision. "The church divides the community one day out of seven."⁷⁷ Now separate services are held, with St James having services on the 1st and 3rd Sundays only. Some of the St James' people go to Glentunnel on 2nd Sundays of the month, while others do not go anywhere on that day. The St James' folk don't attend the evening service at St Ambrose, and have commented that it's sad the church divides on a Sunday the people they rub shoulders with during the week. Why don't, or won't, the St James' folk go to the evening service? Is it to do with the building or denomination or time? Is it because the service is different – the Anglican liturgy and several books to juggle? Is it because they don't know who will be leading the service – clergy or a lay person? The Methodist experience in England is that when a church was closed they lost two-thirds of their membership.⁷⁸ Bennett writes of a similar experience of a denomination deciding to centralize all its worship at one key location. The result was that people failed to make the transition as they felt a sense of loss that their local place of worship had been closed.⁷⁹ This is within a denomination, not across denominations, which seems to compound the issues of going elsewhere, and which is a different scenario from Sheffield, although the results could easily be similar. These facts show that for rural people community is more important than denomination. However it is my

⁷⁶ Interview, 30/11/06

⁷⁷ Interview, Mr and Mrs P, 30/11/06

⁷⁸ George Lings, "The Village and Fresh Expressions: Is Rural Different?" Encounters on the Edge, No. 27, 2005, p. 12

⁷⁹ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 35

observation that in Sheffield, while the Anglicans and Presbyterians did have combined services once a month during some of 2006, the St James' people are mainly very loyal to their Presbyterian roots. Even so, if there were an opportunity to resume combined services, it would seem that most are keen to support these. I've suggested that both groups should get together and request a revisiting of the issue, but so far this has not brought about any change in the vestry's decision. It's not uncommon for some people from St James to remark that we should be doing things together with the Anglicans in Sheffield. Mr P said that his mother was an Anglican, and that he went to the Anglican Church with her from 1947 to 1957. He gave lots of advice about building the present Anglican Church (St Ambrose). After he was married he went with his wife to the Presbyterian Church.⁸⁰

In the late 1970s the Anglican church had a strong rural base in the Sheffield area, and the clergy and wardens were still doing monthly or bimonthly visits to parishioners, gathering up a few others in the process. The Rev. Hugh Paterson, the previous vicar, said that in those days it was relatively easy to get new folk to come to church. The annual Christmas services combined with the AAW group were well patronised with a full church.⁸¹

I asked The Rev. Lionel Brown who was minister of Malvern Co-operating Parish through the 1908s about attendances at St James then. He told me that there were a dozen children from four families who attended Sunday School regularly, and that the adult attendance was about twenty. He added that there were no thoughts of closing the church then, and that at that time there were still monthly services at Springfield.⁸² Mrs P had earlier told me that in the 1980s the church was full.⁸³ In a church that seats about 60 people, it looks quite "full" with 30 or so folk.

The Anglican and Presbyterian women took year about to do catering as a fundraiser at the Sheffield Ewe Fair, and all local women of each denomination were contacted to contribute various food items. It was a bit like a giant organised pot luck tea, and was a

⁸⁰ Interview, 30/11/06

⁸¹ Interview, 13/12/06

⁸² Phone conversation, 18/04/07

⁸³ Interview, 30/11/06

“good social day” as well as a “big money spinner” for the church.⁸⁴ Some gave their contribution every year to whoever was doing the organising. As the yardings decreased so did the need for catering, with only one catering event per year now which is just about all over by lunchtime and there probably hasn’t been any catering on the same scale for the last ten years or so.⁸⁵

Rural people often have long associations with the church, which still holds some importance even if the current generation doesn’t attend. Hawkes notes that “many country people still nurse a vague affinity with the church because they are within two generations of a family church-going tradition. The identity of local communities was partly defined by the church, and so the church is part of their story.”⁸⁶ Hugh Paterson commented that there are long associations with the church and that these are still important even if the current generation no longer attends.⁸⁷ Rural communities, therefore, still feel a sense of ownership in the church, even if they themselves do not attend. Most rural funerals and weddings are still led by clergy, even if not in a church setting, while some are conducted by celebrants in non-church venues such as a local community hall. This is true in Sheffield. If a funeral is not led by either the local vicar or parish minister, it is likely to be led by the previous vicar or other retired clergy living in the area. It is less likely to be led by a secular celebrant, perhaps because celebrants are not known locally nor as easily obtained as in town.

In the 1970s the crucial issue for the church was rural depopulation which saw the closure of many small churches. Nowadays there seems to be a loss of denominational focus and locus with many churches combining within or across denominational boundaries. Hawkes points out that until the 1960s the churches were important centres for socialising, agricultural advice and sport, as well as in education⁸⁸ – not so much in the area of education, especially in rural areas of New Zealand. Churches were places for socialising with many events happening outside of Sunday services. Some of these were mainly for women, such as women’s groups and catering. Agricultural advice would often take place in informal groups after church or during the week. The roles of

⁸⁴ Interview, Mrs W, 20/09/06

⁸⁵ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

⁸⁶ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 1

⁸⁷ Interview, 13/12/06

⁸⁸ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 1

agricultural advice and sport have been largely taken over by government agencies and voluntary organisations, which means that the rural church has had to re-examine its role and place in the community. How well it has done so is shown in how many people actively support the church and its activities today. Hawkes states that the rural church can offer an important role in providing pastoral care, mainly because of the high profile of its ministers in the community.⁸⁹ This high profile is seen in local clergy being invited to significant community events such as the Darfield High School prizegiving. Hawkes also observes that in a world characterised by change and shallow relationships, the church is well placed to provide intimacy and deep caring relationships as the gospel is essentially relational.⁹⁰ The rural church also needs to be seen to be speaking out with an informed voice about contemporary issues such as ecology, global trade and sustainability, which could give it a new profile in today's world. Hawkes suggests that the church should also speak out for the poor and marginalised in our communities, at a time when the wealthy use their position to protect themselves and the structures that keep them wealthy.⁹¹ This may be called a prophetic ministry, but the difficulty is that usually the churches, not just rural churches, do not seem to attract or minister effectively to the poor and marginalised, so how can they speak authoritatively on their behalf?

Most rural churches are small, with often only a handful of people attending worship services. St James' attendance is usually between 8 and 12. Small churches see individuals and personal relationships as important, which means that one person (perhaps a patriarch or matriarch, or a key family) can block any particular course of action such as closing the church building. This also means that there is strong pressure on newcomers to conform, thus erecting a barrier to outsiders, which makes growing a small church very difficult. Small churches often see themselves as friendly, but it is very hard to join a "friendly" church as relationships are well established. "Barriers to the gospel are often as much sociological as theological."⁹² In her correspondence, *The Malvern Record* editor told me that traditionally rural churches have been supported by farmers rather than farm workers⁹³ – this is an example of a sociological barrier to the

⁸⁹ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 2

⁹⁰ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 2

⁹¹ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 2

⁹² Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 5

⁹³ From unpublished private correspondence from Denise Scott, Nov. 2006

gospel, and is true of Sheffield where one sees very few townfolk, other than retired people, attending worship services. Most of the regular worshippers are retired farmers, although some are still living and working on their farms, even though they are in their 70s. Small country churches still expect people to come to them, rather than their going out and taking the gospel out into the community.⁹⁴ They feel safe in themselves, and often regard themselves (perhaps subconsciously) very much as a minority group. While they relate to other people in the community during the week, they rarely ask these folk to church on Sundays. Newcomers will inevitably change the fabric of the group – is this what the existing church members fear?

The challenge for the rural church, as Hawkes sees it, is how to remodel ministry structures which have served it well in the past to cope with the changes that have taken place in the country.⁹⁵ The rapidly decreasing numbers of ordained ministers on a full-time stipend means that there will be fewer to go around, and therefore there cannot be one minister to each parish as there has traditionally been. Lings states that the reduction in rural clergy is “the chief change” in the rural church.⁹⁶ The church has often been slow in adapting to change, and this is a contributing factor in its losing its relevance to the community around it. There is a window of opportunity here for rural communities and the church to reorganise their life in order to look more attractive to outsiders so that they may want to be involved in the church and the community. The question is, could they do this? Further, do they have the energy or the motivation or the resources to do something different? Are they able to look outside the square and see what possible alternatives there may be for the future of the church and the community in Sheffield?

In summary ...

Sheffield is a small rural township. Farming in the area has traditionally been arable, but the last two decades have seen diversification and change, especially subdivision of land into lifestyle blocks and conversion to dairy units. Government policies, particularly in relation to farming subsidies, have had repercussions on rural communities, and Sheffield is no exception. Reduced requirements for farm labour, mainly because of the

⁹⁴ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 4

⁹⁵ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p. 5

⁹⁶ Lings, *The Village and Fresh Expressions*, p. 9

use of contractors for farming tasks, have been a large factor in the depopulation of rural communities, and this has affected the church to some extent as well. The rise of lifestyle blocks has brought about rural repopulation, with the people who live on them staying on average about 10 years – some far less. The traditional rural folk and the lifestylers have little in common, and tensions are sometimes evident. The remaining social groups in Sheffield are the Garden Club, the Sheffield/Springfield Plunket Toy Library and the volunteer fire brigade. Other organisations which previously provided social interaction such as Playcentre are now centralised in Darfield.

Both the Anglican and Presbyterian churches in Sheffield have only a handful of regular worshippers, the great majority of whom are 65 or older. While rural people have coped with changes in their communities and farming practices, they seem to resist changes in their church, which means it has become less relevant to the community. People's history and identity used to be linked with the church as well as the community, but less with the church now. Although there has been a decrease in the relevance or place of the church many rural people still retain some association with it even if the current generation doesn't attend. Many of the Sheffield Anglicans and Presbyterians would like the combined services to resume, but this does not appear likely at present. The church used to have a social role, especially through catering at the Ewe Fairs, but as the yardings have decreased so has the need for catering. Small numbers at services can be a disincentive to new people joining, as existing relationships are well established. Barriers to the gospel can be sociological as well as theological, and may be even the building itself. Rural churches still seem to have a "come to us" attitude.

For small rural churches to become relevant again to their community they need to be able to speak out with an informed voice about contemporary issues such as globalisation, the environment and sustainability. They also need to remodel their ministry structures, and to model deep, meaningful relationships through good quality pastoral care. But do they have the energy or motivation to do this?

Part 4

Feelings

Sheffield and the surrounding community have been considered in detail. We now look at what the people themselves are feeling. Have rural communities settled for fewer services than urban people? What is the “heart” of a rural community, of Sheffield? People have a sense of “ownership” or attachment to a church building even if they don’t attend, and rural people will resist the closure of their church even if numbers are low. The closure of a church and a school evokes similar feelings of loss and grief. A church’s closure eventually leads to a drop in worship attendances. While closing churches is about dying, it does not have to be construed as failure, but rather an opportunity for redirection of ministry resources. All the stages of grief of dying people can be observed in dying congregations, and the people may experience significant emotional trauma. It is hard to discover hope in a rural community that has experienced a string of losses.

The closure of a church building is just one more loss in a community that has lost people, several schools in neighbouring communities, its Post Office (and local banking facility), the local telephone exchange, its library, the Presbyterian manse (and resident minister),⁹⁷ its general store and the railway station. This is a vicious circle: people leave the district and so services/businesses are withdrawn, and so there are fewer people to patronize the remaining services/businesses, so they close too. The people experience feelings of despair, resignation, despondency. A resident of Birdlings Flat, a small coastal settlement on Bank’s Peninsula, was quoted as saying in one of the free newspapers in Christchurch (January 2007) concerning there being no resident general practitioner at Little River (some 12 km away) that rural people should not expect all the services that are found in a city. This comment makes it sound as though some rural people regard themselves as inferior to urban folk, as they don’t expect a reasonable range of services. Lings’ classification of concentric rings shows that the further away one gets from an urban centre, fewer facilities and decreasing access are facts of life.⁹⁸ Mr D B told me that one person who no longer attends church had said to him that to sell

⁹⁷ The former Malvern Anglican vicar (now retired) lives in ex-vicarage in Sheffield, and still has some influence in the community because of the length of his ministry (35 years).

⁹⁸ Lings, *The Village and Fresh Expressions*, p. 4

the church would tear the heart out of the community.⁹⁹ As he doesn't attend church, why is he saying this sort of thing? He has experienced the local school closures of the late 1940s and early '50s. He has seen local services and businesses shut their doors. Is the church perhaps the one stable element left in the district as far as he's concerned, despite his non-involvement? Mr and Mrs D B said that for them the church is the centre of the community, and they continue going out of loyalty to the community. However, if St James were to close they said they would get up half an hour earlier and go to Trinity Church in Darfield.

It seems that other organizations have eclipsed the church as being the heart of the community, and even some of these no longer exist in Sheffield, e.g., playcentre, Plunket and Young Wives. What is now the centre of the Sheffield community? It is probably not the pub as it has lost patronage since the "smokefree" legislation. Where do the people go now to have a drink with their mates? I suspect they stay at home, especially if they want to smoke while drinking as they can't go to other public buildings. Is it the volunteer fire brigade, as these men are held in very high regard for the work they do, except that it's not a large group? From my interviewing it would seem that because so few people now attend church in Sheffield it is no longer the centre of the community or its social life, if it ever was. As there are two churches in Sheffield, neither of them could logically lay claim to being the centre of the community. Mr D B commented that the Showgrounds pavilion had been the heart of Sheffield – not so now as it is used only about twice a year.¹⁰⁰ Probably there is no one answer to these questions, except that on Anzac Day the community's centre is the war memorial. Bennett observes that a local school serves a vital social function, being a focal point and a nucleus for community activity. Furthermore, rural churches, he says, depend heavily on their local schools, not only for religious educational opportunities such as Bible in Schools, but as a means of communicating church matters to as wide a group as possible.¹⁰¹ I think that schools do give a sense of community when people have children there, but after children have left the school that sense of community diminishes. It must be said, however, that schools are often willing to publish notices from other community organisations in their newsletters – that has been my experience in both suburban and rural schools. Bennett also notes that local people jealously guard

⁹⁹ Interview, 31/08/06

¹⁰⁰ Interview, 31/08/06

¹⁰¹ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 91

the viability of both their local churches and schools.¹⁰² Between 1993 and 2005 100 out of 806 schools had been closed or had closure foreshadowed.¹⁰³ We have seen throughout the country the very strong reaction of rural folk to the Labour government's policy of the rationalization (i.e., closing and amalgamation) of local schools – even high schools in smaller cities such as Invercargill did not escape being closed. The government's response to this protest action was to put a five-year moratorium on school closures in place from February 2004 – but they still happen, e.g., at Parnassus, but not necessarily because of government policy or decree.

Parnassus, 132 km north of Christchurch, was once a very busy town. Its school was closed in January 2007 as the school roll had dropped to two pupils, mainly because of people leaving the community. The school board chairwoman, Mrs Fiona Bush, said that several families had wanted the school to remain open, but then some of those left the area or their children went to other schools. She said that the real problem is the declining rural community, partly because of fewer married couples working in rural communities. While the time was right to close the school, the community was really devastated at its closing. "It's sort of been on the cards for the last few years, but when it actually happens, it's still not a nice thing." Some older members of the community whose children had attended the school and left, were originally opposed to the closure. The school had been well resourced through community fundraising, and the school had a low teacher-pupil ratio which made for a good education for the pupils. The children from Parnassus already played sport and attended clubs and dances in Cheviot, 14 km away. "We're one community, really, with two schools."¹⁰⁴ In a not dissimilar way, Sheffield is one community (apart from the lifestylers) with two church buildings.

The closure of a church brings the same sort of responses. People know it will happen, but when it does peoples' reactions are strong because of their emotional attachment to the building. People who have had past associations with a church feel affected by its closure, even if they no longer attend. These reactions are typical of what I've heard around Sheffield, e.g., "if the church is closed it will tear the heart out of the community", "the centre of the community will be lost", "what will happen to the things my

¹⁰² Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 91

¹⁰³ Bennett, *God of the Whenua*, p. 91

¹⁰⁴ *Declining Roll Closes Tiny School*, 22/11/2006, © NZPA. xtramsn.co.nz/news, © xtra Ltd, 2006. Downloaded 27/11/2006

parents/grandparents gave to the church?” Bill Bennett in an email to me (06/09/06) wrote he has “noted that rural congregations by and large refuse to consider closure as an option. They own the worship place (church, hall, home) jealously”. Sheffield has experienced a loss of married couples working on farms because farmers now use contractors,¹⁰⁵ which means fewer children in the area. Lifestyle block people, as they generally commute to town each day, take their children to city schools. Is the education there necessarily any better? Over the past few years the Darfield High School roll has grown. The official roll at 1 March 2004 was 597, an increase of over 20 local students in twelve months. Roll growth means more teaching spaces for several subject areas.¹⁰⁶ They must be doing something right! The school roll is currently 729, including international students, an increase of 28 students from 2006.¹⁰⁷

There is a sense of “ownership” of or attachment to a church building, even though the present generation never attends, for whatever reason. Rosemary McLeod, whose column is published in *The Press*, wrote about the church in Masterton which her grandmother and mother had attended and where their funerals were held.¹⁰⁸ Some children had thrown stones through the stained glass windows of the church, and Rosemary McLeod wrote about her attachment to the building because of the memories, an attachment which she admits is sentimental, but “sentimentality is better than no feelings at all”. Hawkes comments that small churches are particularly resilient and will resist closure even when numbers are low, because the church building is considered sacred, not just in the traditional sense, but in their being significant in defining people’s identity and history, as well as being places for worship.¹⁰⁹ So people feel for their church because of the memories of services, both regular and special, the people who are no longer there with them because they’ve moved from the district or have died, the work and energy they have put into the building and the land around it, and the stories which may have become almost akin to folklore. Ellen Morseth, a writer about spirituality and church governance, says that memories are to be preserved and celebrated but never worshipped. The closure of a church is like a funeral, but even in a funeral we still

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Mr and Mrs D B, 31/08/06

¹⁰⁶ *The Malvern Record*, issue no. 2403, 23/03/04

¹⁰⁷ *The Malvern Record*, issue no. 2550, 20/03/07

¹⁰⁸ *The Press*, Christchurch, 7 December 2006

¹⁰⁹ Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p.4

celebrate life. Death, as we boldly proclaim, does not have the last word. That word is life, and it was spoken at the cross in Jesus Christ for us for all time.¹¹⁰

From the 1980s there has been a long, sustained period of changes in the community, the church, and in farming practices. Farming is less labour-intensive which means that fewer people are employed on farms, the farmers either doing the work themselves with more modern equipment, or using contractors where the cost of owning one's own machinery is prohibitive, e.g., for heading and baling. The church is regarded, rightly or wrongly, as offering stability amongst the constant changes. Some people thrive on change, while others feel threatened by it or try to resist it.

Mrs W said that if the church closed a lot of people would not combine with the Anglicans (if that were ever a possibility again) or go to another church. They will feel left out, alienated, "but that's part and parcel of closing a church".¹¹¹ So there is a definite potential for loss of people. However, Mr and Mrs D B felt that both the local Anglicans and Presbyterians were keen to have combined services.¹¹² Often when churches combine, they eventually decline to about the size of one of the original congregations, which is what happened at St Luke's Union Church, Nelson, where I was minister in the mid-1980s. This is the experience of The Rev. Andrew Starkey who told me that when the Anglican church at Ross on the West Coast was closed (mainly because of the state of the building), the parishioners began to worship in the Presbyterian church, but at a different time from the Presbyterians. Worship numbers gradually dwindled over time until there were fewer people worshipping at the two services in the one building than there had been at either one of the churches before one of them was closed. This also confirms the fact that closing a church building will lead to a loss of worshippers for a variety of reasons such as connections with the original building, distance to another venue, or the perceived difficulty of worshipping in an unfamiliar place.

Information on the blog site of the Parish Church of Flecknoe, England, shows that worshippers will be lost if a church is closed. The article refers to the Methodist experience when they reduced the number of services offered in their smaller rural chapels in the hope that people would travel to a nearby chapel where regular worship

¹¹⁰ Beth Ann Gaede, *Ending with Hope*, p. 28

¹¹¹ Interview, 20/09/06

¹¹² Interview, 31/08/06

was considered sustainable. "The policy became to close small local chapels and ask people to come together to form critical mass or joinable churches. Conversations I had with Methodist leaders tell me one third of the people simply stopped going anywhere, one third stayed local but transferred (usually to the Anglicans) and only one third complied."¹¹³ In the Church of England many services became monthly rather than weekly, which made it difficult to find out when and where services were being held, and this led to irregular attendance patterns as an "unwelcome norm in spirituality".¹¹⁴ Casual worshippers were discouraged from attending worship in rural areas as they did not know when and where services were. Lings later comments that in small rural communities the casual attender is practically extinct, and that in the age of the car worshippers are not worried by the idea of travelling an extra distance to larger or more lively churches. In the Malvern area church services are published weekly in the *Malvern Record*, one of the local free newspapers. The pattern of services changes from week to week, which makes it hard for outsiders to find worship times and locations unless they have access to the *Record*.

While there is an increasing body of literature about rural churches and rural ministry, there has been very little written until recently about closing churches, something which is happening quite often now. *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, edited by Beth Ann Gaede, is a helpful volume to guide church leaders when they are assisting congregations which are faced with the decision to close or not to close.¹¹⁵ It has three parts: Decisions and Dynamics in Closing, Stories about Closings, and Resources for Leaders. Its fifteen chapters are written by a variety of authors from their own experiences. While closing churches is about dying, it does not have to be about failure, but can be about redirecting resources for new ministry. Closing a congregation is full of pain and possibility. We don't welcome pain in our bodies or in our churches, and sometimes any potential future possibilities are hard to imagine. Mrs P told me that the writing is on the wall for St James to be closed, but people haven't started to make the transition. She added that they may feel they haven't the energy to make the

¹¹³ Lings, *The Village and Fresh Expressions*, p. 12

= <http://flecknoeparish.blogspot.com/2006/04/encounters-on-edge-rural-church-today.html>

¹¹⁴ Lings, *The Village and Fresh Expressions*, p. 10

¹¹⁵ Beth Ann Gaede, ed. *Size Transitions in Congregations: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Bethesda, MD, USA: The Alban Institute, 2001.

changes that would occur.¹¹⁶ With such a mindset hope does not come easily, and one becomes resigned to what will inevitably happen, without trying to look past that event.

Most, if not all of the regular worshipping congregation at St James accept that the building will not last much longer and the church will have to close. But it is a different story when ideas about actual closure are mentioned. Comments such as, “Keep the church open for another five years, and it will see most of us out”, or, “just keep it open until its centennial” (2010), reflect this attitude. Mrs W is of the opinion that St James will eventually close – the question is when? She added: “We’re all old. I guess the Anglicans are the same.”¹¹⁷ Mrs H told me she enjoys going to worship at St James each week because it’s the closest place, and she “needs her batteries recharged” for the coming week. She felt that the future for the church in Sheffield is not very bright at the moment, but she is always hoping even though it’s difficult to see ahead clearly.¹¹⁸ The church has been affected, unfortunately, by a shifting population, and also because the lifestylers and newer members of the community do not come to church or get very involved in the local community. This lady felt the church’s task is to be in the community and to be faithful followers of Jesus. I agree, but people need to show their faith both by the way they live their lives, and also by being ready to speak about their faith. It is very difficult for a small congregation, such as that at St James to look attractive to outsiders – a larger congregation may have more success in this regard – as it is not easy to join a small church. Mrs W who moved to Sheffield eight years ago told me that while St James is a “friendly little place” she felt a bit of an outsider at church for a while, but now that she’s been there a while it’s easier.¹¹⁹ She is currently one of the Parish Council representatives for Sheffield.

Beth Ann Gaede in her preface to her book, *Ending with Hope*, mentions being with a group of pastors as they described the denial they had found in the church about the fact that congregations close. They had seen that denial among members of congregations with worship attendance of fewer than a dozen as well as the clergy who serve them.¹²⁰ In her essay, “The Members’ Experience”, in Gaede’s book, Tanya Rasmussen, a pastor

¹¹⁶ Interview, 30/11/06

¹¹⁷ Interview, 20/09/06

¹¹⁸ Interview, 20/09/06

¹¹⁹ Interview, 20/09/06

¹²⁰ Beth Ann Gaede, *Ending with Hope*, p. v

from the United Methodist Church who is ministering in Sweden (as at 2002), finds that Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five emotional states in dying patients (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) have clear parallels in dying congregations.¹²¹ Denial, she says, is a subtle yet extremely powerful force for every congregation facing death. In a later chapter, "The Pastor's Experience", N. Nelson Granade, Jr., a Baptist pastor in North Carolina, agrees that denial is a strong process, and as it is the first stage of grief along with isolation, we can be lulled into believing our own tales. To him, at one time a minister in a church which was in steady decline, it seemed easier to maintain the denial than to admit to the approaching death.¹²²

This is the case in Sheffield. "It is their church, and it is dying. But no-one talks about it."¹²³ The St James' people know that the church will have to close sometime, but talk very little about it. Denial has to be faced and acknowledged otherwise it can hold people back in the past. When a congregation begins to consider closing seriously it is breaking through its denial. Even so, some members will say things like, It's really not as bad as people are saying, or, We still have the usual number of people here on Sundays, so what's the problem? This is similar to what is heard from some of the St James' folk from time to time when the subject of closing is mentioned. A small number of people, all but one of whom are over 70, does not have the energy to refocus on what the mission of the church is: to reach out to bring others to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We often see or hear of churches' closing, but we still have to learn that individual congregations are not immortal and so, like people, they die. Even so, leaving one's own church building could carry significant emotional trauma.¹²⁴ In a rural community like Sheffield that has lost so much over the years this is yet another blow to those who still live and worship there.

In summary ...

In a community which has experienced multiple losses such as depopulation and closures of businesses and services, the closing of a church is yet another loss. It seems

¹²¹ Tanya Stormo Rasmussen. "The Members' Experience" in *Ending with Hope*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, pp 43-54

¹²² N. Nelson Granade Jr. "The Pastor's Experience", in *Ending with Hope*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, p. 58

¹²³ Ellen Morseth. "Discerning God's Calling" in *Ending with Hope*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, p. 16

¹²⁴ Ellen Morseth. "Discerning God's Calling" in *Ending with Hope*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, p. 28

that rural people have resigned themselves to continued losses, and by and large they have come to accept a smaller range of services than urban areas.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the centre of a community is. Sheffield's community foci have been described as the church, the Showgrounds, the hotel, the school, Playcentre and Plunket. On Anzac Day the focus is undoubtedly the war memorial. Rural people jealously guard the viability of their school and church, and feelings about closing either run high. They generally refuse to accept closure as an option, and rather than accept closure continue in denial because it is easier than to admit inevitable closure. Closing a church is full of pain and possibility. Congregations are not immortal and, like people, they die. However, even at funerals we celebrate life. Death does not have the last word!

There is a sense of "ownership" or attachment to a church even if the present generation no longer attends, as the building contains memories of special occasions and people. Memories should be preserved and celebrated but never worshipped. The St James people realise that their church will have to be closed but they feel that when this happens some folk will drop out of church altogether. Given this feeling it is difficult to be optimistic about the future.

Part 5

Losses

One of the predominant feelings when a church is closed is a sense of loss, and there are several losses which may occur, one of which is what may happen to the church buildings if the church is closed. Some people leave a small church to go elsewhere, usually to a larger church. Country folk accept travelling as part of the rural way of life, although some have concerns about the costs of travelling further to church, and also about losing people as relationships are important in small churches. If people drop out of church altogether when the building is closed, what does that say about their understanding of Christianity and their faith? Alan Jamieson's study of why people have left evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches because they felt their faith was not growing in those churches is both enlightening and encouraging.

Loss of denominational presence

The people at St James, Sheffield, still regard themselves as Presbyterians, even though they've been part of the Malvern Co-operating Parish since 1979. The question that needs to be asked here is about the nature of the people's identity. Is their identity tied to a denomination, even in the current climate when denominations are increasingly seen as irrelevant, especially by younger people who don't have the same knowledge of the heritage of the place? Is their identity related to the building, or the worshipping congregation, perhaps including those who don't attend any more? The attachment to a building is in a large measure because of the various memories that the building holds: baptisms, weddings, funerals, as well as items donated in memory of deceased family members. There are also the stories (oral tradition), working bees, people who no longer come but are perhaps still in the area. Why do they not now attend? There are as many answers to this question as there are people, and some who don't go now say they still have their faith, but don't have to go to church to express that faith. This raises questions about their understanding of the Christian faith. Is Christianity to do with relationships, or is Christianity simply a matter of individual and private belief? Certainly just going to church doesn't make one a Christian,¹²⁵ but it is very difficult to be a Christian in isolation. We need the support of others who are on the same journey through life. There

¹²⁵ ... any more than going to McDonald's will make you a hamburger!

are people who have dropped out of traditional expressions of the church yet still have a vibrant faith and a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Spiritual growth restricted

Alan Jamieson, a Wellington pastor and sociologist, has studied groups of people who have left evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches to join alternative worship groups so that their faith could continue to grow through perhaps struggle and doubt, after feeling that their faith had stagnated in the churches they'd been part of – some had been in leadership roles for a considerable time and had burnt out to a greater or lesser degree.¹²⁶ This is very different from people who no longer attend worship and who say they still believe, but for whom their faith has become intensely personal and who have no part in, nor time for the institutional church. I wonder if their faith is alive and well, or if it's just something that's been part of their past life. Will they look to the church if they experience a life crisis such as the death of a family member? My feeling is that they won't, but I'm open to being surprised! Alan Jamieson is a Baptist pastor, and so writes from a different ecclesiology from the so-called "mainline" denominational churches. These churches are situated in urban areas, and so are very different from rural churches. Many if not all of the newer evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches are congregational in nature, having no particular affiliation to a national church which traditional denominations have. They may be part of an association such as the New Life or Apostolic churches, but that association does not make decisions for them. Instead the congregation makes its own decisions about its life and work and who its leaders shall be.

People will travel further – or not

It is very likely that people who attend the churches which Alan Jamieson studied have transferred to them from mainline churches, wanting something more than those churches were offering, such as more flexible worship and modern music led by worship leaders and accompanied by a band rather than an organ. Large churches seem to grow at the expense of smaller churches, and large city churches at the expense of rural churches as they can offer so much more because of bigger numbers. If people are

¹²⁶ Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches*. Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing Ltd, 2000

willing to travel, they will go to a larger church.¹²⁷ In a larger church people can remain anonymous or not get too involved if they so desire, whereas in a small rural church it's "all hands on deck" and people know each other well. Mrs P said that she had gone to other churches outside the area as far away as Oxford as she felt she wasn't getting the spiritual food she felt she needed to grow in her Christian faith. She now regularly attends church at Sheffield and Darfield, and also attends Womens Aglow (an interdenominational ministry to women) each month in Darfield. She feels she has a broader view of church than just Sheffield, but is happy there for the present, even though she feels she has done all she can there.¹²⁸ We live in a very mobile society, and, even with the price of petrol, people will travel to a larger church or a church where they feel they'll get the spiritual uplift they seek. St Mark's, Flecknoe's blogsite refers to the same phenomenon in England – "... in the age of the car, worshippers are not worried by the idea of travelling a few extra miles to larger and more lively churches."¹²⁹

There may be people who will simply drop out of church if St James closes, because of distance (fixed income is a factor mentioned in connection with this¹³⁰), or reluctance to go to another church which has more and different people – "will we be welcome and find acceptance there?" So there is the fear of loss of people, which means a perceived reduction or loss of fellowship and intimacy/familiarity, as well as the threat of the demise of the closely knit small group of regular worshippers. An opposite fear, perhaps a subconscious fear, is that newcomers would change the dynamics of the existing group, meaning that the close relationships as well as the dynamics of the group may alter.

Concern for the buildings' future

When Malvern Co-operating Parish was formed in 1979 there were ten preaching places. There are now only six, and when St James closes it will be yet another preaching place lost. Is this a sign of the times, or just a continuation of what's already happened around the parish? There are naturally questions about the St James Church. What will happen to it given its condition? Will the building be demolished? (It may be not so difficult to handle if the building is sold, even if it is relocated, rather than being

¹²⁷ I saw this happen in the mid-'80s when one family drove from Culverden to Kaikoura to go to a New Life Church rather than attend one of the local Presbyterian churches.

¹²⁸ Interview, 30/11/06

¹²⁹ Blogsite, <http://flecknoeparish.blogspot.com/2006/04/encounters-on-edge-rural-church-today.html>, 27/02/07

¹³⁰ Interview, Mrs H, 20/09/06

demolished.) What about the Sunday School building (permanent materials) if the church is no longer used? These are legitimate questions which must be listened to, and then dealt with sensitively and pastorally.

In summary ...

This chapter raises questions about where people find their identity – in a denomination, a building, in relationships with other people, or a relationship with the living Christ. When St James Church is closed a loss of denominational focus will likely be felt as this was a Presbyterian church prior to 1979. There is the distinct possibility of people ceasing to attend worship because of distance or finance, or because of reluctance to go elsewhere where they are not so well known.

There are, however, some people who leave an institutional church as they feel their Christian growth has been impeded although they retain a vibrant faith. They have sought alternative expressions of church which give them freedom to express their faith in different ways.

People's concerns about the future of buildings need to be heard and dealt with sensitively and pastorally.

Part 6

Opportunities

That there is the possibility of losses when St James closes is to be acknowledged. In a more positive tone new opportunities are evident or may become apparent in the future. I mention the closure of St Andrews Church, Loburn, near Rangiora, as an example of a recently closed rural church, for what led up to the decision to close and what opportunities there are for the future.

Some ways of assisting people pastorally to cope with change are preaching, an organisational life cycle, and a “chaos” model to help people find a way ahead. How can ministry structures be remodeled to fit a changing community? Is a home group a viable possibility so that people can continue to meet and support one another, or is combining with another church feasible? Finally, what is an appropriate closing ritual for when the time comes?

I spoke with the Rev. Ivan Pierce, Interim Moderator of the Rangiora Presbyterian Parish, concerning the closure of the St Andrews Church at Loburn.¹³¹ Services were held weekly until 2005, when they were reduced to two per month. Of the six regular worshippers only three of the congregation lived locally, with one couple living in Christchurch. The group is “fiercely independent”, but there is a very special, good atmosphere, as with other small congregations such as St James, Sheffield. There were tears evident after the meeting which decided to close St Andrews Church, despite the topic having been raised two or three times during the last twelve years. Tears were also apparent at the last communion service in November 2006, which was the last service held in the church prior to the closing service. The closing service was held on 10 December 2006, at which there were about 90 people present (the church holds 60), and 10 apologies. Some of those present were not known to local people, which shows that the church obviously meant a lot to a wider group.

One elder (Mr K – a member of the Loburn congregation for twenty years, and who has recently read through the St Andrews minutes book) wrote to me, enclosing a copy of the closing service. I asked him why he thought the closing service had attracted such a

¹³¹ Interview, 15/12/06

large number of people, and why they hadn't attended in recent years. He replied that many of them had attended in the past, perhaps 30, 40 or 50 years ago. Some had left the area, while others had stopped coming to services at St Andrews either because they were attending church in Rangiora or no longer went to church. Perhaps for these people the closing service provided for them a sense of closure or finality on a previous part of their lives. May be they still felt some emotional attachment to the building, and attending the closing service was their way of dealing with those feelings. Mr K said that at the closing service many people expressed the sentiment, What a shame this had to happen. Have you tried this or that or something else? But, he wrote, the support wasn't there in the last twelve years to keep the building open and allow services to continue.¹³² Ultimately the reasons for closure were dwindling numbers, an even smaller group of regular attendees, sharply rising costs and the health of the building – reasons similar to those which are leading to the closing of St James, Sheffield. In addition, the increasing age of the members meant that ongoing work such as lawnmowing became impossible and had to be contracted out – yet another cost on the whole parish. People gave donations for the closing service and for afternoon tea, and the offering was given to a local group, "Helping Hand". The communion table and font were relocated to Knox Church, Rangiora, and the communion cup returned to the folk who gave it – so there are ongoing memorials to St Andrews Church. The interest from the proceeds of the sale will be used for the mission of the church, something that is very important to the parish. This is a new opportunity that will be a reality because of finance now being available.

Craig Satterlee has written a very useful book to help church leaders in their preaching during times of change: *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition*. Satterlee is associate professor of homiletics at the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago. He believes that change is an active participant in the life of every congregation, and that any congregational transition will eventually find its way into preaching, as the power of certain occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms shapes the preaching event. "During a congregational transition, faithful preaching ensures that that the gospel – and not a program or agenda – is proclaimed and heard."¹³³ Satterlee believes that faithful and effective preaching models and declares that God speaks through change as the congregation moves toward transition.

¹³² Unpublished private correspondence, 07/02/07

¹³³ Craig A. Satterlee. *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition*. Herndon, VA: The Alba Institute, 2005, p. xv

He suggests that change may be the way God speaks.¹³⁴ Five “foundational commitments” make up the first part of the book: understanding the journey of transition, trust preaching, the sermon in transition, holy and active listening, and anchored in God. These are a guide for approaching each situation of change. The second section considers eight specific congregational transitions, four of which are listed in the next paragraph. He calls these chapters “briefs” as they are a summary of facts, a set of instructions for a task, and are intended to be a starting point rather than a last word on the topic.

In his explanation of the transition briefs Satterlee draws on William Bridges’ organizational life cycle.¹³⁵ There are seven stages in the organizational life cycle: dreaming and planning, launching the vision, getting organized, making it (becoming established and doing significant ministry), institutionalization (from which point a church must decide either to choose the path of renewal or die), closing in (losing connection with the outside world or the wider church), and finally dying. Satterlee says that there are eight changes that congregations may experience, and he lists the four most common changes that can happen in the life of any congregation: change of pastor; new vision for mission; significant change in membership or giving patterns; completion of a congregation’s ministry. When a church gets down to a few regular worshippers and is not attracting (nor attractive to) newcomers, it has a tendency to turn in on itself and want to preserve the status quo at any cost. They want to keep what they’ve got, even if there are no more people coming. From here it is natural that the church will progress to the seventh stage of the life cycle, dying – but the process may be long and drawn out, as the members are fearful of letting go of what got them to this point – their sense of identity, their ways of doing ministry (usually only amongst themselves) and their way of being a Christian church. Sheffield is long past the first five life cycle stages, but is reluctant to take the step of faith to stage seven, dying. Could it be that they just gave up when worship numbers seriously declined, or did they (perhaps subconsciously) want to retain the status quo rather than searching for a new mission vision and taking concrete steps to grow?

¹³⁴ Craig A. Satterlee. *When God Speaks through Change*, p. xv

¹³⁵ In Craig A. Satterlee. *When God Speaks through Change*, pp 110-112

How does Bridges' organisational life cycle fit the Sheffield situation? Nearly 100 years ago there must have been a vision which the local people had of establishing a Presbyterian church in the township. They dreamed and planned (stage one), and eventually the church building and manse became a reality with significant ministry happening from there (stage three). It was due not only to church-related factors, including the state of the building, but also to external factors such as changes in the area which reflected changes going in rural areas throughout New Zealand (population decline and the advent of lifestyle blocks, as well as much better roads and transport), that the Sheffield church gradually declined in numbers.

While Bridges' life cycle has some useful features about what happens to organisations, it does not take external factors into account, and so is not entirely relevant to Sheffield or other rural churches in which decline and death are due to external circumstances as well as internal factors, the former being beyond the control of the church. Stage six, closing in (losing connection with the outside world or the wider church) has happened more by accident than design as the worshipping numbers have reduced to what they are today. In the last three years, since I was appointed to the parish, numbers at St James have been static. At present some members of the congregation will not let the church die (stage seven) to make way for a new direction and mission.

Lyle Schaller, a church researcher and writer, has listed five warning signs about the viability of a congregation.¹³⁶ The third in his list is a neighbourhood church without a neighbourhood constituency. While there still is a community in and around Sheffield, the church has lost touch with it (Bridges' stage six, closing in). Mrs W remarked that the (Sheffield) township has died.¹³⁷ Schaller says that by nature the church is an integral part of the community.¹³⁸ May be it once was, but is it now? Can it ever regain that position? Mrs P told me that she felt the present members had no energy to change their focus to mission rather than survival.¹³⁹ Schaller says that when a congregation lapses into survival mode it is a sure sign that that church is in trouble (the first in his list of warning signs).

¹³⁶ Beth Ann Gaede, ed., *Ending With Hope*, p. 24

¹³⁷ Interview, 20/09/06

¹³⁸ Beth Ann Gaede, ed., *Ending With Hope*, p. 24

¹³⁹ Interview, 30/11/06

I work part-time in a hospice in which people are helped to die with dignity and as little pain as possible. I often see families having to let their loved one go, and begin a new stage of their lives without that person. It is a faith issue to let go of the familiar and go on to a new stage, holding on to God. It's the same for a congregation faced with closure. The familiar is safe and comfortable territory, while the future is uncertain and perhaps somewhat scary. Like human bodies, congregations are living organisms. They are not immortal and therefore can die. The death of a congregation can lead to a new vision for its future life and mission, if it is willing to put its future in God's hands, trusting that God has the answers and the way forward. That is not to suggest that the way ahead will be easy or straightforward. It may not be particularly palatable or easily accepted by the congregation, yet in the long term people will be able to look back and realize with hindsight that the way was right. The following model is a way of helping people deal with change in a church or congregation.

The closure of a church building causes a deep change in the lives of those who have attended that church, and that's why there is a considerable amount of emotion attached to the event and what leads up to it. It is also important pastorally that the change be handled well by the church leadership, both lay and ordained. John Scherer's "chaos" model for change¹⁴⁰ is a helpful tool for managing deep changes that go on in congregations, as it allows people time to reflect on where they are at and where they want to head. The model has five stages:

¹⁴⁰ In Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational tools for Leaders*. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1998, pp 82-98

Pain

(plus)

Possibility

(minus)

The Box

(will lead to)

Chaos – The Wilderness

(where we will be helped to find)

The creative and faithful choice

A major trigger for change is **pain**. In order for a process of change to proceed people must be allowed to feel the pain of a significant discrepancy between the way things *are* and the way things *could be*.¹⁴¹ There is certainly some pain at St James, but only because they know that this church building cannot go on indefinitely. Closure has been talked about since before my coming to the parish in 2003, but there has been no real attempt to face up to the reality that the church will close, and therefore they cannot realize the discrepancy between the way things are and what could be. The dominant forces for closing St James Church are the small size of the congregation and the state of the building. The people know that, but don't seem to want to look past the inevitable closure to what may be beyond that.

Pain leads to **possibility**, the recognition that something can be achieved. It is a description of a healthier state of being, such as an overweight person seeing him/herself leaner and more healthy. The possibilities draw a picture of what could be, without yet knowing how to get there. While pain provides motivation, possibilities provide both motivation and direction. This could be called "faith", a bridge between present reality and a desired state. The difficulty here with regard to St James is that the people have no vision for the future, and therefore have no thought of a "desired state". They want to remain as they are, retaining the present pattern of services (two per month), keeping the church open long enough to "see (them) out", or until the centenary of the building in 2010. The possibilities for them when the church is closed include choosing whether to go to church or not. If they choose to continue going to church, they

¹⁴¹ Gilbert R. Rendle. *Leading Change in the Congregation*, p. 84

need to decide where: Springfield (if the frequency of services were increased there) or Darfield. It seems that at present there is no desire to change as the church is still open and no firm decision has been reached concerning its future, apart from no major expenditure on it.

The third step is **minus the box**. So that deeper levels of change can be addressed in a congregation, they must be helped to break out of the box. The box is our collection of assumptions about the way we've done things in the past, or it can be our ideas about the way we think things should happen in the future. Creativity and risk are required to break out of our boxes, as we cannot address change or solve complex riddles by staying inside the old boxes.

Once outside the box we enter **chaos (the wilderness)**. A system that is in chaos long enough will reorganize, renewing itself and going beyond its former self to accommodate and relate much more effectively with its new environment. It is a difficult act of leadership to hold a congregation in the chaos, not knowing what to do next, so that new possibilities of creation, which would have otherwise been hidden, may surface. The wilderness is the place of faith, and where practical links between faith and action are made. This step cannot be rushed. The faith question of the wilderness is, What is the "new thing" God is doing in Sheffield? (Isaiah 43:18, 19). This question assists people to look to the future rather than hang on to the past, even though the past is familiar territory.

The chaos helps us find **the creative and faithful choice**. Even at this stage the way ahead may still not be clear for whatever reorganization must take place. There are still choices to be made, and an appropriate one selected for the way ahead. Deep changes come about by learning from one's pain, dreaming new possibilities, breaking out of boxes and learning to live in the wilderness or chaos. Our faith stories assure us that God is to be encountered in the wilderness where we do not have control and do not know the rules.

This model for dealing with change seems very optimistic about the future, in that it is assumed that there is a "creative and faithful choice" to look forward to. I don't detect any energy or optimism for the future of the church in Sheffield, such as when people

say that if the church were to remain open for another few years it would see most of them out. Then they add that they realize that the church will definitely close – “when” is the question. I therefore wonder how relevant this model for change is to St James. However, it is but a model which could be a basis for making the real decisions for the future. Having said that, what are some creative and faithful choices for St James as it faces closure? Some suggestions follow, but none of these may be the eventual outcome.

“The challenge for the rural church is how to remodel ministry structures which have served it well in the past to cope with the changes that have taken place in the country.”¹⁴² The church in general, not just the rural church, has been slow to adapt to change, and this has contributed to a loss of relevance to the community around it. Instead of being at the cutting edge of what is happening in the community and responding to community needs, the church has developed almost a ghetto or survival mentality, putting energy into merely maintaining what it has already got and not finding energy and impetus for mission. Some of the things the church used to do such as social gatherings have been taken over by other community groups like Plunket, playcentres, school communities, sports groups, and even the local volunteer fire brigade. While the church should be seeking to respond to and meet community needs, its agenda should not be set by the community, but by the heritage of the church, i.e., scripture and tradition. The church must also show it can be trusted to offer quality programmes for the benefit of the members of the community, programmes such as the Alpha Marriage Course. People today are looking for meaningful and healthy relationships, and the church is well placed to show the surrounding communities about the deep relationships that are, or should be, a reality between Christians.

What are some possibilities for remodeling ministry structures to help the church cope with the changes that have occurred in the community? There are various ministry structures in current use in smaller congregations, especially in country areas: full-time resident stipended minister; part-time stipendiary minister (shared with another nearby parish, or having another source of income); ministry team in which lay people are ordained or commissioned for specific roles in their local congregation; local ordained ministry (people licensed or ordained for ministry in their own congregation). The natural

¹⁴² Hawkes, *The Country Is Different*, p.5

tendency is for congregations to hang on to fulltime stipendiary ministry for as long as possible, until the money runs out, as happened a few years ago in the Maheno-Otepopo parish (which was a merger of two parishes) south of Oamaru, where The Rev. Winston Baker had his ministry extended a year at a time until the parish could no longer afford to pay him. The parish now has a ministry team at one of the preaching places and a service there every week. Another two churches have occasional services, and the remaining three have very few if any services now and are under threat of closure or amalgamation.¹⁴³ George Lings suggests that it is better to provide simple but sustainable weekly lay-led services of the word, with Eucharist less frequently, rather than operating with a priest who flits around the area, making and building few pastoral contacts. He thinks that the suggestion of lay-led services is particularly fascinating and apposite in these days of priest shortages.¹⁴⁴ St Marks, Flecknoe, faced with this shortage, took the difficult decision to “close” in terms of regular services and offer four services a year: Easter Day, Harvest Festival, the annual carol service and Christmas Day. They realised that casual attenders may be discouraged from coming to these services, but they are realistic that there are very few visitors in these days of easy transport to larger centres.¹⁴⁵

Churches would be well advised to make decisions about closure earlier, rather than waiting for an inevitable crisis, like running out of money. This means that there are still some financial resources available for the next stage of their life. In his chapter in *Ending with Hope* Chris Hobgood writes that the first of four lessons to be learned from the congregational endings he has witnessed is don't wait too long or it will be too late, “too late, that is, for a closure that will be managed faithfully while giving appropriate and needed pastoral care to members”.¹⁴⁶ He suggests that grief and depression can immobilize a congregation instead of paying attention to planning for the future, whatever the future may bring.¹⁴⁷ This immobilizing is evident at Sheffield when people say things like, “Just keep the place open for another five years and it will see most of us out”¹⁴⁸ or, “St James will definitely close – the question is when”.¹⁴⁹ Such comments are

¹⁴³ Phone conversation with The Rev. Winston Baker, 29/03/07

¹⁴⁴ Lings, *The Village and Fresh Expressions*, p. 15

¹⁴⁵ Blogsite, St Mark's, Flecknoe, 27/02/07

¹⁴⁶ Hobgood. “A Judicatory Perspective” in *Ending with Hope*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, pp. 77-88.

¹⁴⁷ Hobgood. “A Judicatory Perspective” in *Ending with Hope*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, pp. 77-88.

¹⁴⁸ Mrs H at a congregational meeting in 2005

¹⁴⁹ Interview, Mrs W, 20/09/06

about hanging on to the status quo and putting off any thoughts of closing the church, so nothing gets done. Part of the pastoral task is to assist the congregation through their grieving process, helping them see the big picture of their congregational journey and so not feel that they have done something wrong when the end is near. They have to be helped to see that closure is not failure.

That some congregations want to hang on until the bitter end begs the question, What is their faith based on? Is it based in or around a particular building, or a denomination, or a small group of people? Our faith, if it is not grounded in God and his promises, will not stand the test of time or testing. This is a pastoral situation which is dealt with by preaching, Bible studies and personal conversations, so that people are helped to move on. The Israelite people led by Moses through the wilderness had a visible sign in the form of a pillar of fire and cloud to lead them. We have no such sign; “we live by faith, not by sight”,¹⁵⁰ which means that there is an element of risk in following God and his “new thing”. We just might get it wrong! But that is what makes faith exciting and causes it to grow. There is a saying that faith can be spelled “R-I-S-K”. One possible way ahead which may be God’s “new thing” for Sheffield is a home group, perhaps meeting at a time other than a Sunday morning. There is a home group which includes people from outside the Sheffield area, but which at present is attended by only a few of the St James’ people.

The Anglican Church at Pigeon Bay, Banks Peninsula, is in a similar position to St James’, Sheffield. There are about four regular worshippers, and therefore the church is likely to be closed. These people have recently met several times in homes. They did the things they normally do at church: singing, praying, Bible reading, some teaching. At one such meeting there were about ten people present, some of whom are rarely if ever seen at church services. This is exciting, and shows the potential of home groups or house churches. People find that a home is less threatening than a church, especially if there is only a small number of worshippers sitting in pews in a largely empty building. However, Mrs P said that there seems to be a resistance to home groups, perhaps because they don’t understand the concept of a home group or they don’t have a thirst for the Bible, rather wanting to do practical things.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:7

¹⁵¹ Interview, 30/11/06

In the Tas Valley in England cell groups were started in a multi-benefice parish. The parish had several church buildings, and so local church members had already experienced diversity which has helped them to appreciate that there are different ways of being and doing church. They also saw that small numbers of worshippers can be regarded as normal and good, and also that size is not a bar to quality of worship, which means that a cell group or home group with perhaps six or a dozen people is not a huge change for them.¹⁵² Rural people today, as in New Zealand and elsewhere, are used to small attendances at services, but great and meaningful worship can still happen there. I look back over the last three years and can recall some really special services in our small rural churches, even if there were only a few people there. In contrast there is something very special about seeing a small rural church filled with people for a special occasion.

The use of established networks that the Tas Valley churches made was beneficial in assisting the change to cell groups as it helped break down resistance to change. There was also the pragmatic arrangement that cells could meet any time of the week to fit in with times that people could manage. George Lings suggests that what works may last.¹⁵³ It is a paradigm shift to change from what has been done for a long time at Sheffield to shift out of the church building and Sunday services to a group meeting in someone's home at a different time of the week. Home groups have the added bonus that while people may come to church for certain special events, such as Easter and Christmas, to a certain extent people can remain anonymous when going to someone's home – it could be a social visit. Richard King, a past vicar of Ham Street multi-parish benefice in the Cambridge Diocese attributes part of the success of the cell to anonymity. He comments that to set foot inside a church on Sunday, particularly if the congregation is small, is to be instantly recognized, and may well ruin one's non-religious lifetime reputation.¹⁵⁴ Home groups make spiritual exploration possible, in a place where there are few secrets. One of the main elements of the successful *Alpha*

¹⁵² Lings. *Rural Cell Church: A New Wayside Flower*. Encounters 28. Sheffield, England: The Sheffield Centre, 2005, p. 18 = <http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk/issues/no28.htm>
06/03/07

¹⁵³ Lings. *Rural Cell Church*, p. 19

¹⁵⁴ Lings. *Rural Cell Church*, p. 19

courses being run around the world now is the small groups in which people can find acceptance and a place to ask any questions about life and faith.

Home groups have different dynamics from traditional churches. The character of the group changes because people sit around the room, and so they can see each other much more easily than sitting in church pews, although some people may find this intimidating for a while. The home setting is also more intimate than a church building, and people often have a real sense of belonging to the group. Because of this they may feel free to share deep things. Families are very important, so people won't easily commit themselves to a regular night out, especially if they have to choose between family and something else. However, they do commit themselves to sport, hobbies, Bridge evenings, and so on, but church is different – why? Is the church regarded as just another meeting to attend – or not attend? Part of the problem is that we have compartmentalized church apart from the rest of our lives. The Jewish people of biblical times viewed life as a whole. The Muslim immigrants to our country today find our Western separation of the sacred and the secular hard to understand. In our contemporary multi-religious society the church should be offering a different perspective: the dimension of the anchor of faith in times of change and uncertainty about the future; close and meaningful relationships and deep fellowship, all of which we should be practising in our lives both within the church and in the community. Instead the church has developed a ghetto or fortress mentality, putting lots of energy into just surviving and retaining what it has got, rather than focusing outwards on mission and so letting the light of Christ shine through to the world. In a place like Sheffield, and indeed in many rural communities, where there are so few people attending church, it's easy to focus on survival rather than on mission.

Another possibility is more regular services at St Peter's Community Church, Springfield, five minutes or so away on the main West Coast Road. Again, there is the potential for more worshippers with the combination of two congregations. There were over 20 people present at St Peter's for the combined carol service a week before Christmas 2006, mainly from Springfield and Sheffield areas. It would remain to be seen if a similar number would turn up on a more regular basis throughout the year. The Sheffield people were quite happy to join with the Springfield congregation for this occasion, as they have been on a few other Sundays, but usually for a specific reason. Would they do so on a

more regular basis, as an alternative to going to Trinity Church at Darfield? About six of the regular worshippers at St James go to Trinity Church for parish services on the fourth Sundays of each month, and so are known at Trinity. They would not have too much difficulty in fitting in on a more regular basis. Yes, Sheffield and Darfield are two separate and very distinct communities, the latter growing at some expense to the former.

The present group could meet in the Sunday School hall rather than the church, shifting some of the important items for worship from the church. The seating could be more flexible there, allowing for more intimacy and for more congregational participation in services. However, this is very unlikely to lead to an increase in the worshipping congregation as the present people will just continue on doing the same things until there are too few people to warrant the cost and effort of keeping services going. It is far better to try to end on a high note and combine (if that is what transpires) from a point of strength (comparatively speaking) than to end up with only a few people coming to worship, and the church die a lingering death.

As it is inevitable that St James church will close, what is a pastorally sensitive way of closing it, of performing the closing ritual? The service for closing a church is rather like a funeral, where people have the opportunity to bring closure to that part of their lives. The order of service for the closing of the Loburn Church in the Rangiora parish was beautifully presented with many coloured photos of the church exterior and interior, along with a history of the church and a copy of the building account dated 1890. This is a wonderful memorial of that church – but only when it actually closes.

In summary ...

Reasons for the closure of a church include dwindling numbers, the health of the building along with the costs of maintaining it, and few or no people able to look after the property.

Relevant and faithful preaching during times of transition ensures that the gospel is proclaimed and heard at those times. Change may be the way that God speaks. The way ahead for a congregation facing closure is likely to be uncertain and may feel like a

wilderness experience. However if a congregation is willing to put its future into God's hands, trusting that he has the answers, then they are more able to see and enter into a new vision for their life and mission. Churches should be encouraged to make decisions about closure as early as possible, rather than holding on until a crisis occurs. It is far better for all concerned to end on a high point if that is possible.

For a small church like St James a way forward may be a home group which may attract others who may not go to a church. Other options are more services at Springfield or revisiting combined services with the Sheffield Anglicans.

The final pastoral issue is an appropriate liturgy and ritual for closing the church so that an opportunity is provided to close that part of people's lives. A well planned and presented booklet with photos and some historical details could be a fitting memento.

Is there one way forward? If there is, it is not yet apparent.

Conclusion

Rural communities and churches have been seriously affected in the last twenty or thirty years by both rural depopulation and repopulation. Diversification and changes in farming over the last two decades have affected the church as well as the community.

“Rural” communities are traditionally closely knit, and relationships are important. Rural areas differ from one another because of location, different types of farming practised, and also population mix. Not all people who live in rural areas today are “rural” people. The advent of lifestyle blocks has been a large factor in rural repopulation, but the “lifestylers” are basically urban folk who live in the country. Some tensions are evident between the lifestylers and traditional farmers.

Small churches are rather like an extended family, close relationships being a common characteristic. Both the Anglican and Presbyterian churches in Sheffield have only a handful of regular worshippers, most of whom are 65 or older. While rural people have coped with changes in their communities and farming practices, they seem to resist changes in their church, which is one reason the church has become less relevant to the community. Although there has been a decrease in the relevance or place of the church many rural people still retain some association with it even if the current generation doesn't attend. However, there is a sense of “ownership” or attachment to a church as the building contains memories of special occasions and people.

Many of the Sheffield Anglicans and Presbyterians would like combined services to resume, but this does not seem likely at present. There are theological, physical (i.e., the building), and sociological barriers to the gospel. Small numbers at services can be a disincentive to new people joining, as existing relationships are well established, and newcomers are immediately visible. Rural churches still seem to have a “come to us” attitude, rather than actively asking people to come.

Bill Bennett in his theology of mission states that all Christians are “called to live out and declare the way of Christ within the context of our daily work”, but rural churches are finding that increasingly difficult today because of their small membership. The chief change in the rural church has been the reduction of ordained clergy. Alternative forms

of ministry are being tried, but the pattern of an ordained minister to a parish is deeply ingrained. One way for small rural churches to become relevant again to their community is to be able to speak out with an informed voice about contemporary issues such as globalisation, the environment and sustainability. They also need to model deep, meaningful relationships through good quality pastoral care. But do they have the energy or motivation to do this?

Reasons which result in the closure of a church include dwindling numbers, the health of the building along with the costs of maintaining it, and few or no people able to look after the property. Rural people jealously guard the viability of their church (and similarly their school), and feelings about closing it run high. They generally refuse to accept closure as an option, but rather tend to continue in denial because it is easier than to admit inevitable closure. Closing a church is full of pain and possibility. Congregations are not immortal and, like people, they die. The St James' people realise that their church will have to be closed but they feel that when this happens some folk will drop out of church altogether. Given this feeling it is difficult to be optimistic about the future.

Relevant and faithful preaching during times of transition ensures that the gospel is proclaimed and heard during such uncertain and unsettling times. Change may be the way that God speaks. Churches should be encouraged to make decisions about closure as early as possible, rather than holding on until a crisis occurs. It is far better for all concerned to end on a high point if that is possible.

For a small church like St James' a way forward may be a home group which may attract others who may not go to a Sunday service. Other options are more services at Springfield or revisiting combined services with the Sheffield Anglicans.

In the light of this research, the following points may be made about closing a small rural church:

1. When closure of a church is likely, people experience some uncertainty about the future. They may deny the inevitable closure, and try to put off that occasion. It is better to make a decision about closure early on rather than waiting until a crisis occurs, like running out of money or the building becoming unusable. The traditional shape of the church as a building, minister and clergy house is deeply ingrained. People find it hard to imagine what “church” might be like without a local church building.
2. There is the strong possibility of losing worshippers, and local people are rightly concerned about this. Observations from New Zealand and overseas that some people will go elsewhere for worship (not necessarily in the same denomination), or will attend church less regularly or drop out altogether. Rural people have a high regard for relationships and so strive to maintain these.
3. Whatever happens to the building it is a loss to the church folk and also to the community, even if regular attendance at services is small. Rural people hold on to past links with the church and still want the church to be there for them for significant life events, even if the church is not their denomination or if they do not attend.
4. Possible ways ahead need to be explored. A small rural church is very much like a home group. The Tas Valley people found the transition from church services to home groups reasonably easy to make. Some people find the closeness or intimacy of home groups threatening, while others who may not have come to church can feel very welcome and included. The latter is the experience of the Pigeon Bay people. Some folk look to combining with other churches in the area to try to retain a church presence. For the Sheffield Anglicans and Presbyterians this seems unlikely in the near future.
5. Can a church regain relevance with the surrounding community? To refocus for mission is difficult especially when numbers are small – but it is not impossible if the folk are willing to look “outside the box” to see God’s “new thing”. Churches could perhaps take a lead in speaking about contemporary issues such as globalization,

sustainability and care for God's creation, rather than allowing secular agencies take the forefront of these discussions.

6. The final issue is pastoral – to create an appropriate liturgy and ritual for closing the church so that an opportunity is provided to close that part of people's lives. A well planned and presented booklet with photos and some historical details could be a fitting memento of the church. People's concerns about the future of buildings and contents need to be heard and dealt with sensitively and pastorally.

Is there a clear way forward for Sheffield and other small rural churches? If there is, it is not yet apparent.

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Interview Questions

1. How long have you lived in this area/community?
2. How long have you been attending this church?¹⁵⁵
 - What groups are you part of in this church?
 - How are you/have you been involved in the parish and wider church?
3. What changes have you noticed in this church/parish during this time?
4. What changes have occurred in your community in, say, the last 20 years?¹⁵⁶
 - How has the community adjusted to these changes?
5. What is the last significant pastoral occasion for you in relation to this church?
 - Are there any other significant events/occasions for you related to this church? (e.g., fairs, working bees)¹⁵⁷
6. If this church were to close, what changes do you think you would have to make?
 - What adjustments did you personally make in relation to question 3 (above)?
7. What is it that keeps you attending and supporting this church?
 - If the church closes, where will that energy go?
 - How will your needs that are currently met by the local church, e.g., spiritual and fellowship, be met if the building is closed?
8. Are there any special memories or stories you have of this church?
9. Do you know of people who do not regularly attend this church who may be affected by its closure? (e.g., people who have given specific items of furniture or a plaque)
10. What do you think the future may be for the Church or faith community in this area?¹⁵⁸
11. What do you think God may be calling you to do in this place? (e.g., combine with another congregation)

¹⁵⁵ Also, M/F, age, pattern of church attendance

¹⁵⁶ e.g., removal of SMP's, closure of Post Office, reinstated local Anzac service, Dr's surgery (?), lifestyle blocks and "lifestylers", petrol price increases

¹⁵⁷ Catering group – who? Any not current worshippers? Still in parish?

¹⁵⁸ "I'm on fixed term appointment (3½ years to go) – church in some form/shape will exist after my term is over."

**St James Presbyterian Church, Sheffield
(now part of Malvern Co-operating Parish)**

1. Church opened March 1910 – some people would like it to remain in use until its centenary
2. Communion table given to church in 1940 by Frederick A Bull in memory of his parents
3. Font presented in 1957 by MacDonald family in memory of Annie MacDonald
4. Sunday School building opened February 1958
5. Church exterior rough-casted 1960 – now known to be unsatisfactory and a major cause of the building's deterioration
6. Church interior renovated 1968 (a very "1960's" look – formica)
7. 1966: 3 carved communion chairs given by MacDonald family in memory of Mr and Mrs Alexander MacDonald, foundation members of the congregation, and of their daughter, Miss Katherine MacDonald.
8. Present organ donated by Fred Bull – he is not concerned where it may go to, but that it be used in a church
9. Organ stool donated by W E Baxter in memory of his wife Ivy Blanche Baxter
10. New toilet facilities added to Sunday School hall 1978
11. Honours board (1914-18 War) hangs in church, as well as several memorial plaques
12. Manse at Sheffield sold in mid-1980's
13. Malvern Co-operating Parish formed 1979
14. Parish Council decided in 2005 not to spend any major money on the building, having received a quote of approx. \$17,000 for work that can be seen without removing any cladding
15. Last baptisms in church September 1994
16. Last wedding in church 2003 – last before that, 1993 – both from same family
17. Last confirmation in church March 2007