



August 2004

The Arthur Rank Centre – a focus for the church in rural areas

The story of West Devon's countryside in 2004 is one of continuing change and not a little uncertainty – but also of hope and faith.

Farming might be facing its biggest changes for 60 years with the Single Farm Payment looming, but the church still remains as a strong supporting presence in the West Country's rural communities – and it is through this connection that many country people are finding the work of the Arthur Rank Centre.

Dedicated to serving communities and their churches since 1972, the ARC leads and supports a range of practical initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life in rural areas – particularly for those who, for many reasons, are disadvantaged, vulnerable or excluded.

A partnership between the churches, the Royal Agricultural Society of England and the Rank Foundation, the ARC is based at Stoneleigh in Warwickshire – home of the RASE and the Royal Show – a national focus for rural life and interests.

It was the Bishop of Exeter who recently gave the ARC a golden opportunity to introduce West Devon to its recent work, with an invitation to hold an event in the Palace gardens in July. Both the marquee and the guests, invited from the local business community, withstood the weekend's summer storms (no doubt helped by a prayer or two) to hear the ARC story. This practical partnership between church and community seems to have struck a chord in the South West because the event was a great success.

Of course the ARC has long been active in this region – particularly at times of rural crisis. ARC's sister charity the ARC-Addington Fund remains very active in the area, after a massive campaign that began during Foot and Mouth.

"Devon was so badly hit by FMD," says Ian Bell, ARC-A director, "but it's a county which has welcomed our efforts and there is an enormous will in the farming community to help themselves. Every single LAA livestock market in the area is supporting our 'give a little – make a lot' campaign; and a great number of businesses have pitched in by distributing leaflets."

The ARC's staff, led by Revd. Dr. Gordon Gatward, represent the main Christian denominations, and work in partnership with a wide range of organisations and individuals committed to the countryside.

A focus and resource for Christian and other faith communities, it carries out research into issues which affect agriculture, the environment and rural life.

As the focus for the rural work of churches in England and Wales, the ARC also provides training and support to agricultural chaplains, rural officers and tourism officers of local churches across the country. One such person is Reverend David Ursell, who says the church is still a key to helping people belong to communities – especially in areas like 'the Culm' where isolation is a bane. Like many involved with the ARC, he is not only a Christian but a countryman too; David Ursell is a farmer as well as serving as agricultural chaplain and rural officer for the diocese of Exeter.

An ARC project that has caught the imagination in West Devon's churches more recently is the Eco-Congregation Project - designed to encourage churches to focus on the environment and take action in their buildings, churchyards, worship and community groups.

The project, which passed from Environmental Campaigns (Encams) to the ARC in April, has already sparked green-action in churches around the county. It is a first, easy step to being more environmentally conscious, new project officer Jo Rathbone explains.

The ARC is all about practical help, David Long, ARC's energetic volunteer manager of the Computers for Rural People scheme, reminds us. Two years ago, the charity entered into a partnership arrangement with the Government Disposal Services Agency to access high quality, fully refurbished and guaranteed ex-Government computer equipment. It is proving to be a very practical way to make a positive impact on the quality of life in rural communities, and has already helped many rural community groups, churches, schools, farmers and businesses in West Devon access good quality computer equipment – an internet ready lap top costs just £345 including VAT and delivery.

With Harvest Festival on the horizon, the ARC has just launched plans to work with British Food Fortnight (18 September – 3 October) to help boost local food and farming during Harvest Festival.

Dr Jill Hopkinson, national rural officer for the Church of England, based at the ARC, thinks the church is a great focus for the annual celebration of food and farming – especially at a local level. She says, "Historically the Church has played a key role in reinforcing the connection between people and the land through the Harvest Festival. We are encouraging churches to build on this strength and connect with the growing focus on the benefits to health and our own economy from the production and consumption of British food."

Jill has a wealth of suggestions for activities and events to focus on food issues, and to bring the topic to life in worship. This celebration of wonderful food is one that brings together the Church and the wider rural community each year; the towns and villages of West Devon will surely all be joining in next month.

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A resource pack for the celebration of Harvest Festival, containing a wealth of suggestions for celebrating Harvest, sections to use with schools and appropriate meditations, prayers and an order of service, can be downloaded from the ARC website: www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk.

Eco-Congregation guidance, modular resources and an award scheme to help participating churches are all available online at www.ecocongregation.org

For more information on 'Computers for Rural People' contact the ARC on 02476 853 060 / info@arthurrankcentre.org.uk.

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August 2004