

Beyond the mission statistics - what does growth look like in a rural benefice?

Jo Neary





What is the view like where you are?

What is bringing you life currently?



# Who am I?

---

Rural Team Vicar in a multi parish team

Sarum college Tutor for Rural Ministry and Mission

I wonder how our experience of growing in faith shapes our attitude to church growth now?





What do we  
count,  
measure  
and value?

---

REST

MARK 6:31

Values

Rest

Become

in the

of God

Hope

KINGDOM

not church

Gift

What do we count, measure  
+ value ?

Living  
together

Rep

Living out  
Christ's value

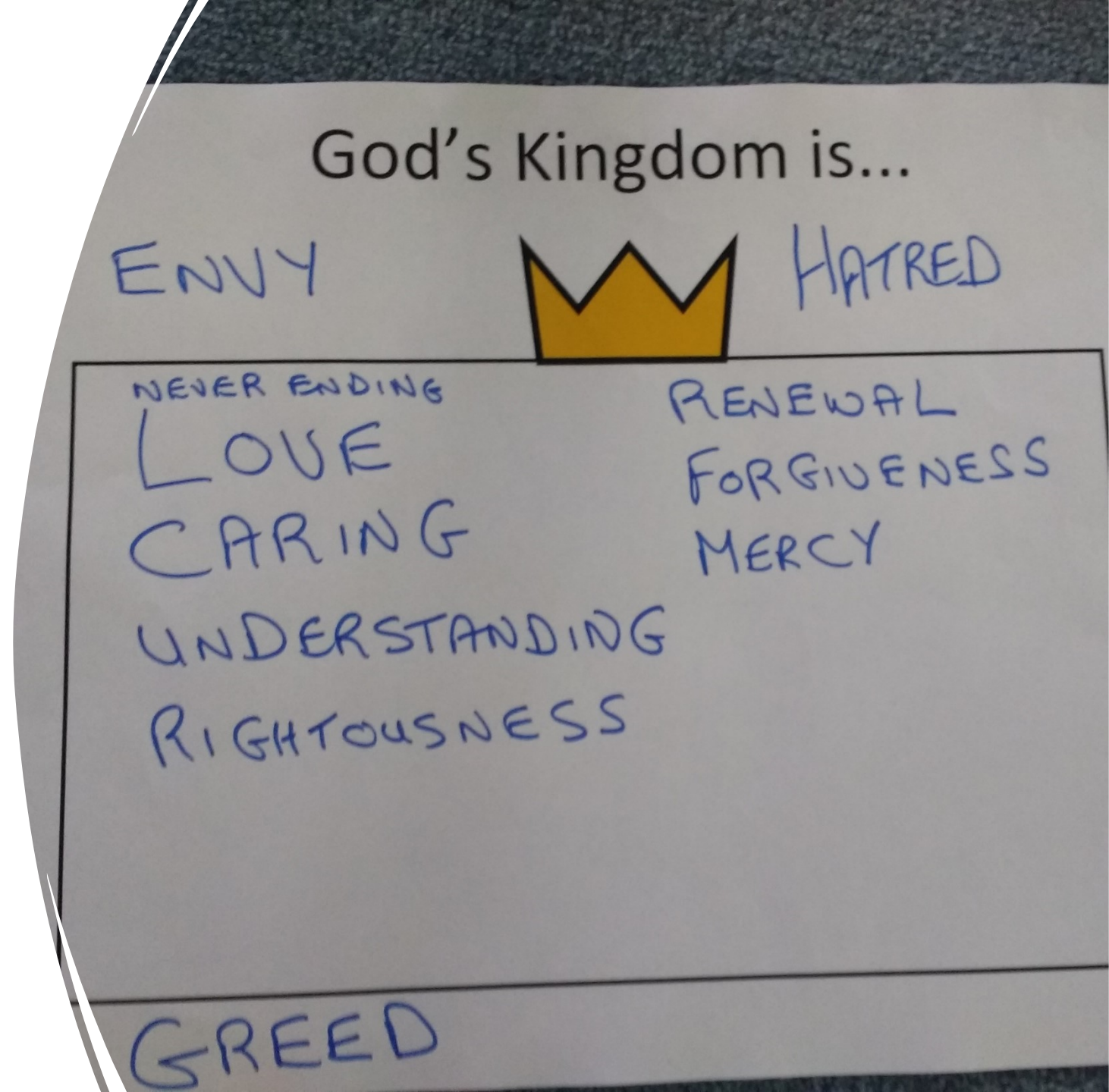


# A provocative beginning

---

“growing the church one lash at a time.”

(Turner, Sarum College tutorial, 24.1.24)





# Rural church growth – beyond the mission statistics

---

Are you growing?

Is your parish growing?

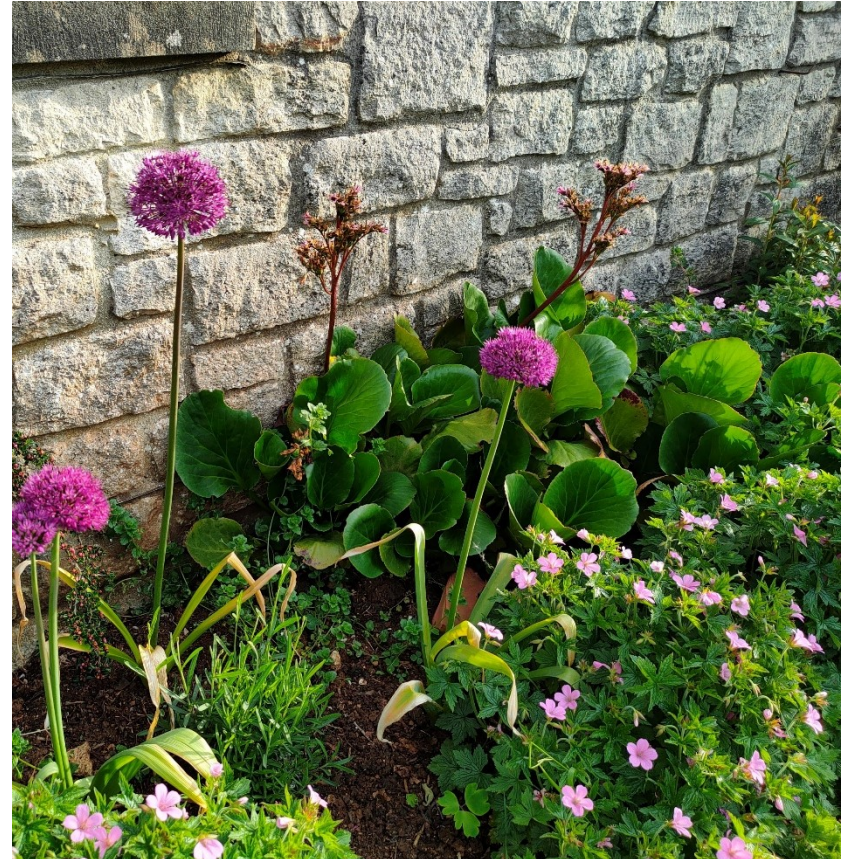
How do you define growth?

How do you measure growth?

Is growth the top of the agenda – if not, what is?

What are you measuring?

How do you know you are flourishing?





# A word of caution.....

---

You are already doing an excellent job

Growing into a pattern of rest and sabbath might be your current calling

Growth is God's work – we are looking for the growth 1 Cor 3:6-7

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth*

This is not always about doing more but being more attentive and intentional.





# What would it look like to pray for growth?

---

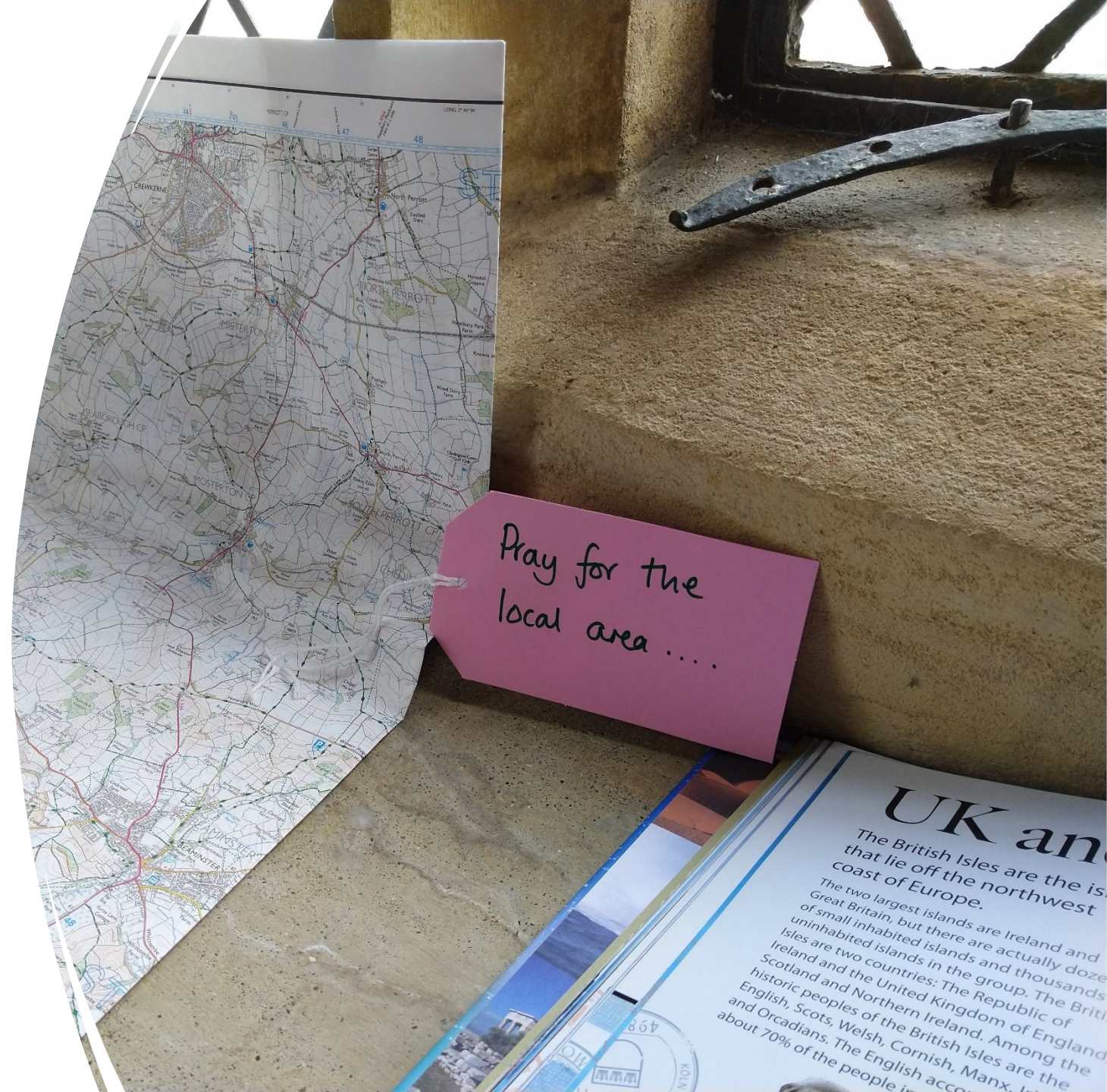
What do you want me to do for you?

When do we pray?

When do we pray for growth in all aspects?

When do we listen – to God, to communities, to ourselves, to each other?

Why don't we pray?





# Challenges of context

---

How does the rural rhythm of growth and abundance and seasonality give us a theology for mission and church growth?





Does the church have the energy to participate in transformation, to be prophetic, to enable flourishing? Or are we....

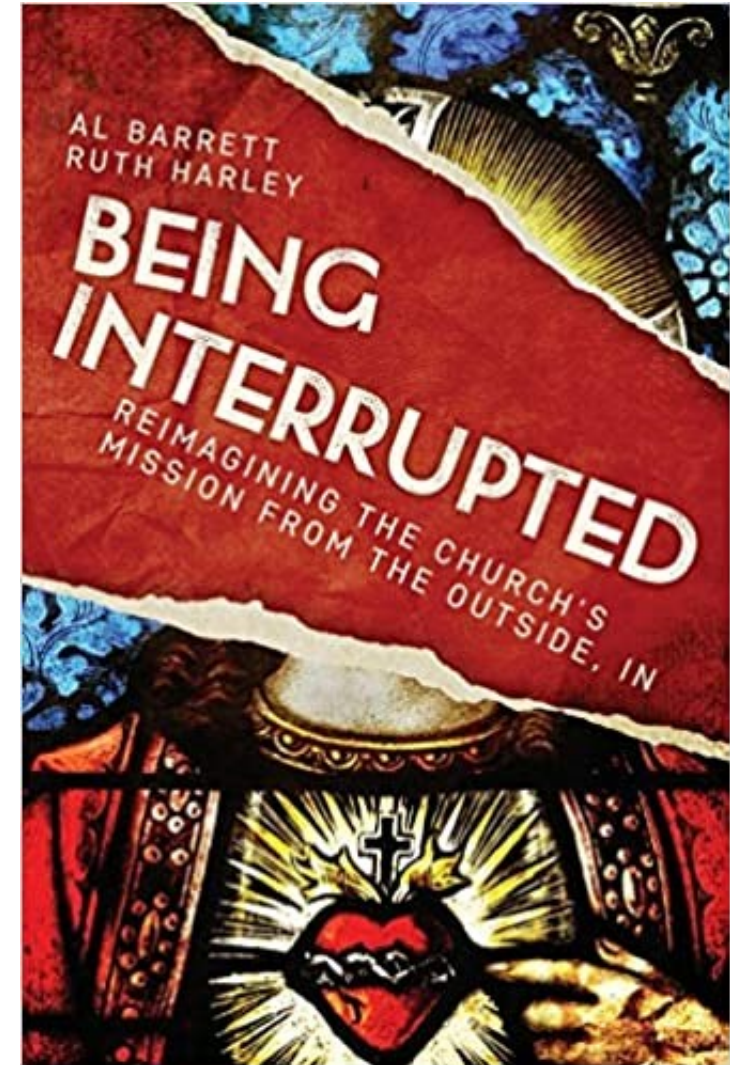
Getting distracted by other things.

Two economies of church

#1 “counting in”

#2 “giving out”

Is there a third way #3 “being interrupted”? Listening to what others say to us.





# Mark 4:30-32

---

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”





# What does rural church growth look like?

---

Doing one thing well

Numerical growth

Doing something new – Fresh Expressions

Discipleship – deepening faith

Connecting into communities

Schools

Online





# Do one thing well

---

Seaborough

Small church

Tiny congregation

Become a “festival like” church

Occasion services in the year

Personal invitations

Hymns and Pimms, Easter, Harvest,  
Remembrance, Christmas





# Numerical growth of congregation

---

Case study – Salway Ash intergenerational church.

Regular attendance 6-10 for CW Eucharist

Monthly intergenerational service 20-24

Responded to the request from families, evolved from all age

People attracted by the style of worship and discursive sermon

Deliberately accessible.





# Fresh Expressions

---

Messy Church/ Gin Church

New congregation

Lay leadership

Team event

Aimed at families

Different time of day

Evolves to accommodate new seasons/needs

Challenges of monthly worship





# Discipleship

Study

Discussion

Teaching

Worship

Sacrament

Deepening faith

Equipping

Building confidence

WHAT ARE YOUR MOTIVATIONS FOR MISSION?

Printed text on the map includes:

- "Mission is not one exercise book"
- "there is not one exercise book"
- "everything in it"
- "live in it psalm 24:1"
- "Mission is not the result of who God is but to whom God is sending his people"
- "Church is supposed to be a contrast to society, distinct from the world."
- "The Spirit's job is to help us make disciples who can speak truth to the powers and systems of the world."
- "Culture has negatively impacted the church and church is lacking in strengths"
- "Equip people in the world."
- "We do not equip people in the world."
- "It's my duty as a Christian"
- "It keeps me busy"
- "How do we keep a balance between our faith, 'doing', + mission?"
- "Is it our vocation? What does this mean?"
- "We need to boost the church's finances"
- "Because Jesus commands us"
- "Because God loves the world and has invited us to be part of his plan of salvation for all creation"
- "Like this!"
- "mission has become us studying & etc."
- "The Diocese/District/Synod/other has told us we have to."
- "To Spread God's love"
- "It's what Jesus calls us to do"
- "Comes out of our love of God - called to do it."

Handwritten notes on pink heart-shaped sticky tabs include:

- "Proportion... are we doing too much?? Balance"
- "'Calling' 'Vocation' God's plan"
- "Mission to our families... to our work place"
- "Depends on our definition of 'mission' + 'church'."
- "For much more of the world"
- "Involvement of the world"
- "Killing the world"
- "Killing the world"
- "Killing the world"
- "Killing the world"
- "Killing the world"



AUGUST 2023

Swap children's toys, games, books and school uniform

# Connecting into communities

---

- Foodbank
- Walk in Wednesday
- Summer swap
- Toddler and baby group
- Summer outreach
- Seasonal blessings
- Partnership working
- Listening





# Schools

---

450 children each week

Worship (school and church)

Liturgy

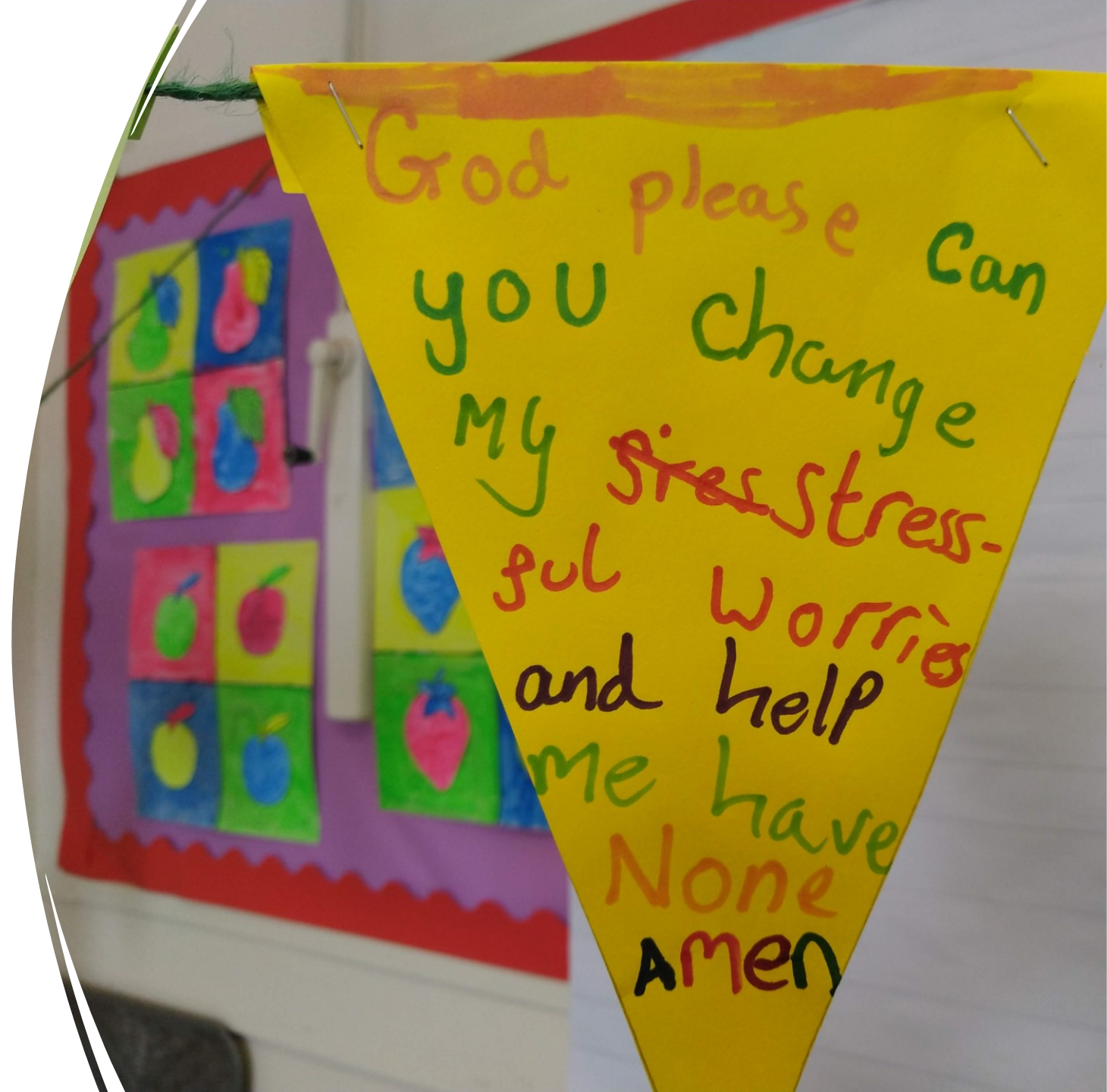
Bible study

Praise

Prayer

Governance

One off occasions





# Online

Connecting wider than the parish

Accessible (or not)

Dispersed community

Hard to offer pastoral care

Surprising reach and impact

The screenshot shows a web browser window with three tabs: 'Photos - Google Photos', 'Photo - Google Photos', and 'Beamminster Team Churches - Yo'. The address bar shows 'youtube.com/@BeamminsterTeam'. The page features a search bar with 'beamminster team' and a 'Premium' badge. The main content area displays a grid of video thumbnails for 'Rev Chat' episodes, including titles like 'Humble Apostles', 'More Than Camel!', 'The Children's Kingdom', 'Hope in a Dangerous World', and 'Tidying for Burglars'. Below this is a 'Worship at Home' section with a 'Play all' button and a description: 'Join in worship from the comfort of your own home - or wherever your screen is. We've all the resources you need to join in with these video services, just follow the links in the video...'. The bottom row shows thumbnails for 'Worship at Home' services, including one with a camel and another with a Noah's Ark toy.



# Attempting to count.....

---

Sunday attendance

Fresh expressions/new worshipping communities

Small groups

Study opportunities

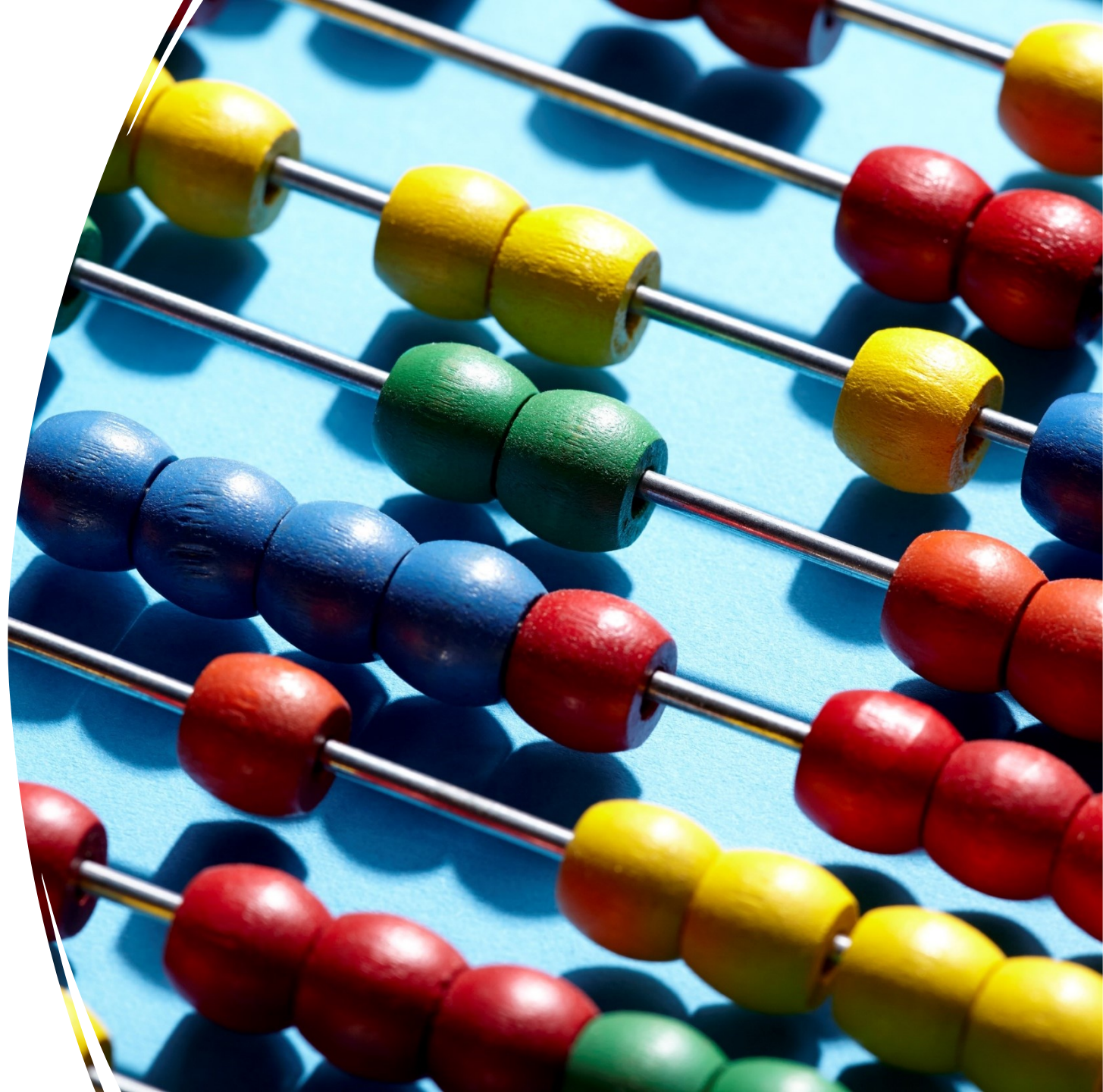
Occasional offices

Outreach events

New partnerships

Vocations

Online engagement





# What is the desired outcome of mission?

---

God's mission, our mission, the churches' mission? Kingdom?

Go out, come to us or a third way?

Relationship, process or what?





# What are the barriers to growth

---

What gets in the way?  
Gatekeepers, structure,  
resources, theology, worship,  
liturgy, sacraments, vision,  
prayer, buildings?





# Naming the Elephant in the room

Q: What are your current issues and challenges around growth?

Q: What might need to die or what might need to develop for new things to grow?





# Dual cropping

How might  
pioneer activities  
support the more  
traditional church,  
creating a mixed  
ecology.



## **A match made in heaven**

Growing peas and beans together delivered significant advantages: the peas quickly cover the ground, suppressing weed development, and the beans act as a scaffold for the peas.

<https://www.cla.org.uk/news/the-rewards-of-dual-cropping/>



# Taking some risks

---

Where is the Spirit at work?

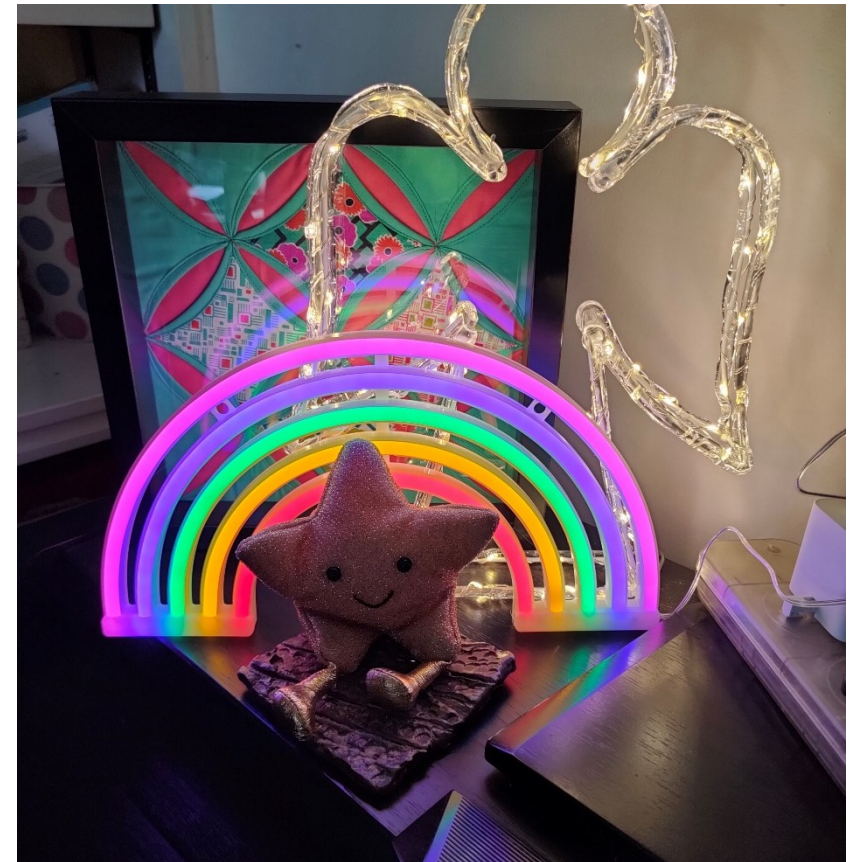
What space and time is there for prayer?

How is leadership supported and enabled for all ages?

Where are new ideas generated, discussed, trialled, evaluated, prayed for?

How are we intentionally creating collaborative spaces to experiment, innovate and imagine?

Who are we building relationships with – “the goal of evangelism is not to convince people to take on a Christian interest in the world but to help them open their very person to the person of Jesus Christ” Root, 2013, p70





Time to pray

—

