

Consultation and Engagement

A Guidance Document

This document is produced by the Diocese of Ely's Church and Community Support Adviser Samuel Pedlar to help PCCs and Friends' Groups think about how to grow their relationships with their local community. Please read it, then contact us to help you turn it into practice.

In this guide you will find advice about engaging and consulting with your community, and discussions of how and why to get started. But first it is important to start this document by defining what consultation and engagement are. It is quite common for people to think that consultation is the same as engagement, but it is not. Consultation helps you to understand, engagement helps you to build relationships, and affect your community. Whilst consultation is often considered to be a part of engagement, it generally refers to something which has a specific, one-off purpose, for instance, plans to widen/improve the use of a church building. Your church should be constantly engaging, but should also consider undertaking some occasional community consultation to gather important data and information to support your projects, start something new, or entice new volunteers.

Consultation tends to include formal activities like public meetings and surveys. Plus workshops and open days which aim to engage people more deeply in the decision-making process.

Consultation is not simply asking people if they like what you are proposing to do, or worse still, telling people what you are going to do. It is a process in which you invite opinions to collectively develop an idea or solution. Consultation can allow local and stakeholders to become more aware of the things your church does/is planning to do, and the facilities that your church has to offer the community. But it will also be an instructional tool which allows you to partner with your community to start new initiatives at your church, create new support for your activities, and set a plan for its future.

Engagement, by contrast, is an ongoing process that seeks to develop relationships with individuals and organisations. Often this means creating strong relationships with your local hall, school, council, and businesses and those who live in the vicinity of the church. Whatever form it takes, we believe that every church should have a plan for community engagement to ensure it is meeting the needs of the parish and any other groups with links to or interests in the church. Strong relationships make it much easier to involve people in future plans and make the church more sustainable. Engagement activities can include things like:

- Starting a Friends or Action Group comprised of members of your community.
- Festivals (e.g. beer festivals, flower festivals, Christmas tree festivals or summer fairs).
- Fresh expression activities (e.g. Messy Church or Muddy Church).
- Community café's and coffee mornings.
- Public and community meetings.
- Community groups using the church (e.g. Musicians, Rotary association, Parish Council, or local history groups, schools visits).
- Participating in community focused activities like Eco Church.

1: Why community engagement and consultation?

A consideration of our 'why's'

When considering and embarking on community engagement and consultation, the first question you should ask yourself is why is it important that your church does this? Finding your why will help you to plot a plan for your community consultation/engagement. Whatever your reason, here are some 'whys' which we think demonstrate the importance of engagement and consultation. It will also equip you to speak to community members about your goals, and the point of the whole exercise.

Why? For the love of your church building: Your church is likely beloved by people within and without the congregation. Community consultation and engagement allows people to access their church physically, socially and spiritually.

Why? Because your church building is a strong witness of the Christian faith in your community. Though the 'church' is the people of God, the strongest Christian witness in your community is your church building. Where else in your parish can you find a space so openly testifying to our faith, and celebrating the stories of faith from the scriptures, saints, and our ancestors? We believe that when you engage and consult with your community you are creating new opportunities for your community to access the building, encounter the teaching of Jesus in action, and connect with God through an activity, a conversation, or by just being in the building and appreciating it's importance. Consultation opens up opportunities for you to understand your community better and for your community to get involved with the church, and engagement opens up opportunities for your community to witness the Christian faith in action, even if the activity they are engaging in is not explicitly Christian.

We all know the 'Golden Rule' found in Matthew 7:12 which says: 'Do to others as you would have them do to you,' we believe that community engagement and consultation is the golden thread. Consultation allows you to better cater to your community and give them a better Christian offering, and engagement even when not explicitly missional allows people access to your church, gives community members a view of Christian hospitality and allows you to show your love for your neighbour.

The former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright stated that: "*Institutions (e.g. buildings) are the scaffolding and plumbing that make mission possible.*" Indeed it is often our interactions within those buildings during community events, services, conversations with visitors and much more, that allow seeds of Christian faith to be planted and grow.

Church buildings architect Nigel Walter noted that church buildings:

"force us to dwell locally, and facilitate our creative action in the world. They are relevant for every church community, whether we are creating a new building, changing or maintaining an existing one, or renting someone else's. We should therefore be theologically intentional in our stewardship of them."

He also noted that church buildings are inter-cultural, inter-age, inter-experiential, and inter-generational spaces which have been important material and local spaces for believers to gather, worship, and experience a touch of heaven from Solomon's temple through to the early church, and down the years to today.

All of our parish churches are great examples of this. But to reflect on this point consider our own Ely Cathedral. This is a space where we go to learn about our heritage, celebrate and commemorate milestones, enjoy events, be educated, build community, worship with one another, and pray silently and reflectively. Our cathedral has changed and been reshaped throughout time but has always remained a space of communal and spiritual value. Your parish church is no different.

As we think about this point, you invited to reflect on what your church means spiritually to your community, and how the mere continual presence of your building in your parish stands as a witness to the Christian faith, and testifies of God's goodness for your community no matter what activity or event is being staged there.

As you do this, read the poignant words below from a homily on John 4:24 by the Rt. Rev'd. Dr Dagmar Winter, the Bishop of Huntingdon regarding the importance of church buildings:

"Faith and worship is a community exercise, so a worshipping community needs a home and the local and wider community a visible reminder of God's presence among us. Of course the church is the people, not the building, but without the building it's so much harder to find the people. And buildings have a role in our formation. An operating theatre is clinical because the work needs to be clinical and sterile. A pub draws you to whatever is on tap and probably makes you long for it!

A Church is the ultimate show and tell, witnessing to expressions of faith, to experiences of God in the past. We stand on the shoulders of saints who have gone before us, and so often we can see how every generation or every era has added what they recognized as important. For that ongoing formation of Christians, to equip us, we also often enough, alongside repair, need to do a spot of renovation or redecoration because God is not a relic of the past but the God of the present and the future, calling us to be disciples, meaning simply students of Jesus in our day.

And then there's beauty: God uses the beauty of a place to open our minds and hearts for an encounter with something beyond us, something holy or sacred' (Zen Hess). God uses the beauty of our churches in the work of sanctifying his people.

In short then, church buildings are vital for both religious and community life. It is therefore crucial for us to consult and engage with our community and partner with our parishes to maintain and use our buildings for the good of our buildings, of our communities, and of our worshipping congregation.

Why? Because community consultation will help you to understand your community better.

Consultation helps you to understand your community better, to have real data and true stories that indicate what your community is, what your community needs, how you can serve your community, and how your community can better help your church.

Why? Because engagement and consultation enables you to both show and tell why your church is important. Consultation invites people to consider why your church is important and reflect on their own experiences, and engagement allows them to feel a part of their church. Remember that your church will mean something different to everyone, and it's important that people get to think about and experience it's value for themselves.

Why? Because community engagement will help you to access your community in a new way. Community engagement helps your church to access new parts and demographics of your community. Perhaps that means doing schools work for the first time, putting on concerts, hosting regular groups in your church, or starting a coffee morning, whatever it is, it will likely open your church to new demographics and give you access to people who you wouldn't normally reach.

Why? Because engagement and consultation help your church to become more supported and sustainable. Consulting with your community allows you to understand their needs, and engaging with your community allows you to build up a support network for your church. Both activities allow your community to grow their own relationship with your church, and often that brings new people who want to volunteer at events, help with tasks around the church, donate money to your mission, and support your goals.

Why? For your church's potential as a community asset. Churches across the Diocese of Ely are partnering with locals to transform their buildings into dual-use community and church spaces, and we believe that it is vital that residents have access to their churches for sacral, community, and educational purposes. Historic buildings like your church are an important part of local identity. The National Churches Trust wrote that "*historic buildings give a community an iconic structure, a symbol in which great pride can be invested and can provide a space where people can come together.*" Consulting and engaging with your community allows residents, regardless of their religious background or membership of the worshipping community, to be involved in supporting what is an important building for them and playing their part in church life.

Why? Because your community has skills that will make the difference to your church. Your church needs people from different backgrounds with passion, skills, and experience to reinvigorate the building, and bring fresh perspectives and new uses to the life and fabric of your church. We recognise that there may be people in your community to:

- Help with practical tasks (by volunteering time and labour).
- Help secure grant funding (by being able to access types of funding not available to the church, and by showing engagement with the community).
- Help with local fundraising (by reaching more local people).
- Help to put on events and volunteer at the church.
- Bring new energy and thinking.
- Starting and running events in the church.
- Provide a link between the church and its residents.
- Allow the community to access the building regularly and take pride in it.
- Celebrate the history of the building and showcase it to the community.
- Help to shape the church's future, in terms of its fabric and its significance to its residents.

Why? Because your building matters to your community historically. Your church building is important to your parish spiritually, communally, mentally, and historically. In fact, your church building is of *evidential, communal, historical, archaeological, spiritual, mental and aesthetic value* to your community and all who come into contact with it. You may be reading this as a Christian with the missional impact of your church in mind. But when conducting public consultation and engagement, it also remember that your church building has a powerful impact on your community and every individual within it. According to Historic England your church building is important because it:

- **Improves quality of life and mental wellbeing:** Visiting heritage sites is shown to increase an individual's pride, aspiration, and mental wellbeing. Volunteering at a heritage site is also shown to improve our wellbeing.
- **Improves tourism:** Heritage sites boost local tourism and interest in an area.
- **Educates people:** Heritage sites enable us to develop skills, and learn about the past and how to maintain such special places for future generations.
- **Helps the environment:** Refurbishing and using old buildings like your church reduces energy emissions and your churchyard is a bio-diverse space full of insects, wildlife and plants.
- **Creates a sense of place:** Investment in the historic environment improves pride in an area and creates a stronger sense of place.
- **Fosters personal development:** Visiting heritage sites improves our connections with others and our community, and can increase our self esteem.
- **Helps to regenerate/develop our communities:** Listed buildings like your church improve the economic value of your parish, and produce economic value for all.

2: Methods of Engagement

Starter ideas for engaging with your parish

Now we have considered our 'whys.' Let's look at some methods of engagement and consultation. Firstly, engagement is often informal and can be spontaneous when an opportunity presents itself. Consultation (i.e. asking questions of your church and community), is a great way to identify engagement opportunities.

Engagement is essentially about ensuring your parish church, as both an organisation and a building, has a strong presence in the local community. There are a variety of methods which depend very much on who you are trying to engage with. Below are some ideas to get you started.

Engaging in partnership:

One of the main ways to engage is through forging partnerships with existing groups and events in your community. That often means thinking creatively and getting out in your community. Whether it is singing carols around the village at Christmas, working with schools and scout groups, organising a village yard sale, doing an annual sponsored walk or running a pub quiz. Remember to be proactive and make connections in your community. This might include:

- Hosting a stall at an existing community event or partnering with local groups to plan a community event.
- Invite groups and organisations to collaborate with you, and use your space.
- If applicable, collaborate with your village hall on new initiatives and explore fundraising activities that would benefit both venues.
- Tailor some of your existing services and events to meet wider interests.
- Host an open day at your church and invite local groups to host a stall, give a talk or display their works.
- Discuss the church with your parish council and attend parish council meetings.
- Create a Friends/ Action Group or community forum where non-congregants can use their skills to assist the church. This would capture the support of community groups and allow your church to be supported by an organised group who could help the PCC to engage with the community and look after the fabric of the church.
- Consider how a local charity might be able to use your church to start a food pantry/bank, offer counselling and advice to individuals and community groups, offer youth and children's groups, or offer a warm space to those in need.
- Consider collecting food for a local foodbank, or partnering with a local charity for one of their projects. These type of partnerships are missional, and help you to engage with key stakeholders and community members.

Hosting events in your church:

Another way to engage is by hosting an event in your church. This might include:

- Hosting activities such as concerts, games, storytelling, craft fairs, festivals or quizzes.
- Hosting open days aimed at families.
- Hosting visits from your local schools.
- Hosting local history lectures.
- Why not theme your open day to something important to your church, e.g. 1940's day, or Medieval day. For example, host an annual service for pets or a sing-a-long at Christmas.
- Why not try sports church? A screening of well loved sports matches in your building.
- Perhaps start a 'memory wall' in your church, a place for your community to pin their pictures and stories about their best memories of your church. Then encourage parishioners to visit the church to leave their comments over a defined period of time, and host a storytelling event in the church to showcase all that has been written.
- Explore ways to engage people in the church as a 'place of worship.' Why not start a coffee morning, a warm space, a youth drop-in or ask local groups whether they want to hire the church?
- Create prayer trees, lighting of candles, taizé services, meditation mazes, or even start a silent hour. Engage with local charities, schools and youth groups on this.
- Use the churchyard. Hosting activities like muddy church, bird watching, bat walks, and even gardening can engage people. Remember that your churchyard is the first part of your church that any visitor sees and some visitors may be more comfortable there than in the building.

Communicate:

Communicating with your community is key. Remember that every time you communicate with your community, you are engaging with them. So why not review:

- How effective your social media or website is. If you don't feel like you have the capacity to run a social media account or website yourself, why not ask those who facilitate your village social media/parish council website whether they could help you by posting updates on behalf of the church?
- Could you create a visitor booklet for those who visit your church? Or perhaps look at new technology to help visitors interact with the heritage in your building?
- Could you participate in a church trail, Heritage Open Days, Ride and Stride or a local festival?
- Do you have a newsletter? If not, could you consider writing a church column in your community newsletter?
- Consider posting flyers through each door in the parish to get the word out about an event, service or project at your church.
- How do your church noticeboards look? Are they easy to read, and up to date? Remember the noticeboard is often all that a parishioner may see of your church or read about it, so it is important that what you put there is accurate and enticing to all.
- Speak to your friends, neighbours and parish stakeholders (e.g. Parish councillors, business owners and school governors), about your plans/activities and seek to get them involved. Word of mouth, and friendly conversations can often be the most powerful tools.

3: Methods of Consultation

Structure of consultation

Your church should always be looking for opportunities to engage with your parish. Likely you are already hosting events, communicating well with your community and its stakeholders, and participating fully in parish life. But if you are looking to launch a new event, start a building project, cater to a more diverse audience, or attract more volunteers, a formal consultation process may be needed. This process is also in itself an engagement opportunity, because it allows you the chance to raise your profile in the parish, ask meaningful questions, seek new support, and publicise your ideas, and invites those outside of your worshipping congregation to get involved and investigate where and how your church can engage and serve its parish.

Consultation tends to involve more formal activities, with a more specific focus. The methods you use depend on who you are consulting and what the purpose of the consultation is. For example you may decide to design a survey that is posted through each house in your parish, or you may decide to host an event or meeting and present your ideas to those in attendance and ask for their feedback. You might attend a village fete and actively survey participants, or host a themed event at your church and ask for those in attendance to complete a survey before they leave. Whatever you plan to do, make sure you are clear about your goals, communicate directly and concisely, and encourage open conversation and dialogue with your respondents. To help you with this, we have produced a step-by-step guide to consulting with your community:

1. The Congregation

Whatever audience you are trying to reach, or approach you take, when undertaking consultation and engagement it is always helpful build up a picture of your local community, in particular to identify who you are not talking to and who isn't currently being reached by your work. Before you think about reaching those outside the church, it is often a good idea to start with the church community by carrying out an audit of the local congregation – a questionnaire for church members. Carried out over two or three consecutive Sundays over coffee after the act of worship, it seeks to encourage a positive vision and energy from members of the congregation to the challenge of ministry and mission in that parish church. This can also help to gather a core group of people to undertake the wider community engagement/consultation, as it should not be the responsibility of just one person.

Questions to the congregation should be framed to encourage a positive response:

- What's the most exciting thing that's happened here in the last five years?
- Looking ahead five years, what would you most like to happen here?
- How could you help to achieve that dream?
- What changes in the community bring fresh opportunity for ministry?
- How can the church be helpful in giving greater voice and security to people on the margins of the local community?
- Which groups are particular priorities for this church to serve?
- Is the church building welcoming and easily accessible?
- How can our church building be enhanced to become an asset in serving our community ministry objectives?
- What great new opportunities come brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems?

Ideally the audit/questionnaire will be tied into some teaching/sermon that looks appreciatively at what already works and invites everyone's dreams and aspirations for the future. If there is a particular opportunity to improve the physical facilities through reordering or redevelopment, then appropriate questions relating to this can be added.

This process will help you as a PCC, and wider congregation to coalesce around a wider vision and understand:

- How your church is engaging with the community now?
- What your church can do (i.e. what resources do you have) within your congregation (e.g. do you have particular facilities at your church, or people with particular skills)?
- Where you need help from locals (e.g. could you build a 'Men's Shed' group, a social group who help with church maintenance)?
- What sections of the community do you hope to reach?
- What are your goals for the consultation and or engagement?

Forming a vision and plan as a PCC will help you as you seek to engage and consult with the wider community, and ask big questions about your community.

2. The Local Community

Whether you are looking to improve how your church actively engages with the local community, or start a consultation process, it is always helpful to next some key information about the community and the people you will be consulting. Below are some key questions to get you started. These are instructional and should hopefully guide your approach.

For example, if you find that your local population is dominated by young families, could you look at starting a children's group, or if there are many retired people in your community, perhaps you may look at starting a community coffee morning, or even a repair shop café which allows people to put their skills to good use. These activities seem as if they will have no impact on your building, but we believe that every missional activity is not only for Christian good, but also builds your reputation in the community, and will help to demonstrate to funders that your church is well supported, beloved, and sustainable. Have a look at the key questions and have a go analysing your community for yourself, these questions will hopefully help you to tailor your approach.

Key questions to consider include:

- Is the local population one of young families, older people, or mature couples? How does this compare to other parishes in your area?
- Is it an area of high unemployment? Or is it a mix of professionals and people working in low-skilled local jobs?
- Is it situated in the commuter belt?
- Who is around during the daytime?
- What type of housing is there and is there enough affordable housing?
- What does the community already have?
- What services are currently provided by the church?
- What services are missing?
- What local development plans are there?
- What community groups and organisations already exist in the area?
- Where do people go to access things that are missing?
- What established organisations and groups are there?
- What activities are provided and where?
- Where are the gaps?

At this point it can also be helpful to explore the potential for heritage learning opportunities. This is because many individuals may love your building but be unknown to you, sometimes your building can be your best asset and allow you to interact with those who wouldn't normally enter your church. When considering how you may lean into this demographic you might start with the following questions:

- Is there a local history group or interested people?
- Are documentary records kept locally?
- Are there any arts, drama, wildlife groups or interested people?
- What do you currently do to tell the history of the church and the surrounding community?
- What potential is there to involve schools?

Consider developing a survey of your parish (see examples and tools below). Tailor the questions to your goals, and make sure all your questions are open, honest, and targeted. Also consider how you will ask these questions. Think of the examples below on surveying techniques, and explore which method you would like to take (e.g. you could actively survey people at an event, or publicise your survey in the local village).

3. Research

The questions above and your survey will always be best served if they are backed up by your own research. You can gather background information which will highlight how the area has changed and might be set to change can be obtained from the following:

- Parish Council
- Parish or Neighbourhood Plan – published or under development?
- Local District Council strategic reports
- Local Council of voluntary service
- Office of National Statistics

- The Diocese can also provide parishes with some census material, including their ‘deprivation score’ from the Index of Multiple Deprivation – measuring issues such as unemployment, access to health care, education etc...
- Community-led plan (Parish Plan)
- Getting involved with the development of a local plan can be a useful tool in addressing the wider strategy for community ministry. If you are involved, then the church will be included.
- Church records, including visitor books and records of past events will also identify changes in visitors, use of the church and perhaps even volunteer numbers.

This process may also mean talking to local stakeholders (e.g. local groups, councils, business owners, associations and schools), about themselves and how they interact with you. This process doesn’t have to be complicated, and you can often learn the most about your community by speaking to your neighbours, friends and volunteers. But all of this data builds up a picture of the role that your church currently serves in the community, and what ways and methods it could use to engage more effectively with the community.

4. Liaise with Local Groups and Organisations

It is for this reason that we would advise you to make contact as early as possible with groups and organisations already operating in the area such as:

- Your own Parish Council/Town Council
- Local Authority and Primary Care Trusts
- Current community users of your church
- Other local groups and organisations, for example the local Women’s Institute, the Scouts and Guides, the Young Farmers, youth groups, pensioners clubs, parent and toddler groups, U3A, environmental groups and amenity and other civic groups, local schools
- Local services such as hospitals, the job centre, the police, schools and Age UK ·Make contact with community leaders and the organisations in your area that work with key groups such as children, the elderly, the disabled, their carers and other disadvantaged vulnerable groups

- Organisations that own the other community buildings
- Other faith groups, local businesses e.g. shops, tea shops, pubs, potteries, craft shops. Talk to other heritage attractions or sites?
- Remember: don't duplicate and don't try to compete with existing activities – that's a waste of resources. Reach out and work with other groups, rather than working in isolation.

5. What picture has emerged?

Finally, having gone through all of these steps, including polling your community and congregation, get together with your PCC/Friends Group again and analyse what picture has emerged.

- What activities could the church start?
- What would the community most like to see happen in the church?
- How do the community view the church?
- How can you lean into the strengths of the church and improve on the weaknesses?
- Have any new opportunities arisen? (e.g. have any community members volunteered to help at the church, or any congregants offered to take on a new role etc.) Can you action any of this?
- What are your steps from here? Starting a regular event, launching an action/friends group, hosting a public meeting? Whatever it is, consider your next steps and use this process as a launchpad for something new or to tweak or affirm whatever you already do.

4: Surveys and Questionnaires

Collecting Key Information

One useful tool for consultations is the parish survey/questionnaire (listed under point 2 in the guide above). This time limited and targeted exercise should ask clear questions that inspire a dialogue e.g. rather than asking "if we put in a toilet would you use the building?" ask questions like "what do you feel is the biggest challenge for our local community", "do you consider the church building to be part of community life, please explain your answer" "are there events and activities you would like to participate in, or do participate in, but need to travel further than you would like to access them"?

Think carefully about when you do the survey, i.e. the depth of winter is not the best time of the year to be embarking on this exercise. Are you going to cover every street in the parish, knocking on every door? If you hand out questionnaires it's hard work getting them back, so do you just have a table outside the church for one week, or are there other key sites such as the church school, health centre, shopping centre, library etc..? Is there a church or village festival where church members could have a stall to publicise parish activities and get people to fill in the questionnaires?

In the past church's have had great success letter dropping surveys to each house in their parish accompanied by a leaflet explaining why the survey is being conducted. Whatever your method, remember that explaining your why's, and giving context often encourages people to take part. On other occasions, church members attended community events (e.g. village festival's) and surveyed attendees, and more recently churches have begun hosting community events such as singalongs, choir concerts, local history lectures, and cheese and wine nights, which include sections about the church, plans for a future project, and how attendees can show support.

Methods of creating a survey:

As you can see above, when designing surveys there are tools that can help you. You can create surveys by using Microsoft word. For example, here is a blank Microsoft Word generated survey template.

- Blank survey: [Blank visitor survey.pdf](#)

But you can also use software such as:

- Jotform: [Free Online Form Builder & Form Creator | Jotform](#)
- Survey monkey: [SurveyMonkey - Free online survey software and questionnaire tool](#)
- Microsoft Forms: [Microsoft Forms | Surveys, Polls, and Quizzes](#)

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Software like this enables you to properly analyse the results, to store information securely, and it has tools that help you to write your questions. You can also print paper copies! Have a go and see what you think.

Analyse the Results and Keep in Touch

It is often helpful to set a timeline for collecting responses, this means that you can manage responses and build momentum for your campaign. When you receive the results it is important to properly analyse the results of your consultation and make them available to people.

·Write a report and assess the feasibility of suggestions.

- As plans become firmed up, ensure people have a further chance to comment.
- Let people know where changes have been made to reflect their views.
- Continue communication and develop opportunities for community participation wherever possible.
- Consider talking to respondents more about their suggestions and offers of help.
- Think carefully about what you will do with the information gathered; how will you thank participants and share/act on responses?

Communicating with respondents

Communicating with your parish and following up with survey respondents be careful with the language you use in communications and avoid words like 'outsiders' when describing people who are not part of the worshipping community. Be open to any new ideas and approaches but try to focus on the positives and try to introduce your project in a way that is inspiring and engaging. For example, avoid the following as they do not set the right tone for getting responses:

- "we have a massive problem to fix and need to raise £££ so we want to know how you want to use the church"
- "we want to put in a toilet so more people can use the building"

Instead when explaining your plans for the church, ask open questions, and ask for respondents to comment. Remember you may have plans, but the much of the point of a consultation is to test and develop your plans, and ask your community to partner with you on your project and engagements. Therefore you must give respondents the opportunity to be honest, and get involved on their terms.

Additionally, when communicating with fellow church members and the public to always explain your why's:

- Why are you doing this?
- Why is it important that they get involved?
- Why now?
- Why them?
- Why are they needed, why are you reaching out to them, why is your offering appealing to them?

Embrace new volunteers even those who would prefer not to attend services and use support wisely - there will be parishioners who hate the thought of face-to-face encounters but are brilliant at researching facts and figures about the locality. Remember to embrace this diversity and lean into the strengths of your team.

5: When there's no community to engage with

Ideas for rural churches, and fragile churches

We are very aware that some churches have small communities, and some have extreme difficulty contacting their community due to events often beyond their control or belonging to ancient history. It's true that in some parishes there might not be enough of a community to sustain a church building, but it's rare that there will simply be no community to engage with.

It depends very much on your definition of community. If you limit it to the worshippers, your existing networks and people you are familiar with, and people living in the immediate area around the church, then there may well be few 'new' people to engage with. But if you widen the definition to include everyone living and/or working in the parish, neighbouring parishes, local schools, special interest groups and tourists, you will find that there is always some form of community to engage with. For instance, All Saint's (pictured) is located in the tiny village of Morborne. Despite being about 5 miles south-west of Peterborough it feels very rural and consists of just 14 households, 23 residents. The PCC are actively engaged with the community running many events, but they want to do more. They are keen to encourage more visitors through initiatives such as 'Champing' and to explore tourism through the church's link to some of the first settlers of America.

Elsewhere at All Saints in Covington, a village of 120 people, the congregation has engaged the community through a recent project to restore their bells, they keep in regular contact with their community through a churchyard maintenance team which involves non-congregants. Church members also put a lot of effort into their festival services (e.g. harvest and candle lit carols), and local history projects. Despite being a small rural village, the efforts of the church congregation have made All Saints into the centre of village life.

Just down the road from Covington is the village of Kings Ripton, which has a population of circa 200 people and 75 houses. The church works with the village hall to put on events such as a community lunch, and more recently the PCC started running a silent auction and a 'pop-up pub' in their St Peter's church. This event also includes family quizzes. All of this enables the church to be in touch with their community, and it means that the church is not only a vital community building but is accessible and appreciated by the village. The PCC have recently begun running their own website with clearly displayed details about events and services: [Help maintain the charm of a medieval church in Kings Ripton \(kingsriptonchurch.co.uk\)](http://kingsriptonchurch.co.uk). By doing all of this, the church is not only positively affecting their village, but also building up relationships and support within their community for their mission and their building.

Another great example of this is, All Saints in the village of Rampton. This is a medieval, Grade II* listed church which is situated in the small village of Rampton just outside of Cambridge. For several years All Saints had a small congregation, an overgrown churchyard, and an unusable building. Despite these challenges, a small group of volunteers stepped forward to look after the Church building and churchyard.

This small group have been working for several years to clean the church, repair its roof and walls, and take care of the churchyard and its curtilage. The majority of action group members are non-church goers and volunteer their time and skills because they care about their village church, want it to survive and thrive, and enjoy the comradery of working alongside their friends and neighbours to prolong their village's greatest heritage asset. As a result of their continued hard work, the church can once again host several well attended services each year as well as weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

In another case the church buildings department are working with a village hall, and the village church to offer affordable and attractive wedding packages to those within the benefice. This example has meant that the small village's two largest stakeholders are working together with one another, and will in future make one another more sustainable. The lesson in this case has been to think creatively, and for the secular and spiritual organisations to work in partnership with one another.

Elsewhere in a village of 80 people with a cricket club, church, and several community organisations, a Friends group has recently been formed to bring all of these stakeholders together and allow the church to play a full part in village life including hosting events, community lunches, and meetings of the parish council. The PCC and Friends are already working together to broaden their support base, and are beginning to co-host events).

The key to success in Morbourne, Covington, Kings Ripton, Rampton and elsewhere has always involved reaching out to the community, and inviting them to use their skills, and make their mark at the church. In Covington, the PCC invite the village to help to maintain the church, and the PCC in turn make efforts to celebrate the village, and make their building into an accessible and welcoming space for all. At Morbourne this meant giving villagers access to events not available in the rest of the village, and in Rampton that meant starting an action group of recently retired men who used their DIY skills to support the church and grow in community with one another.

It can be incredibly difficult to build these links, but looking at building community and filling gaps in your parish, you can make a good start. Just think about Kings Ripton, the village has no pub, and there is a desire in the village for one, so the church stage occasional family friendly 'pop-up pub' events, which fills a need in the community, takes advantage of a gap, and builds relationships with the community.

The key lessons and takeaways from the rural churches in these case studies are:

- **Ask questions of your community and your church:** What does your parish need? What does and what can your church do to help? How can you test and trial your ideas, and who can help?
- **Fill the gap:** Through asking questions, researching your community, and having conversations with community stakeholders you may identify activities, services, or groups that your community lacks and your church may be able to help with.
- **Partner:** Always seek opportunities to collaborate and partner with village organisations. Never try to compete with other activities in your village, instead meet together with other stakeholders and offer opportunities for the church and other stakeholders to collaborate.
- **Expand:** Remember that your church building is an asset that can bring visitors from other places. Your building, events and services are all assets to the village, and have the potential to attract a wide audience beyond your parish.
- **Together:** Whatever you do, bring the village along with you. Remember to engage with them, ask questions, and always pursue opportunities to work together with others. Your church building cannot survive as an island, and nor can any other parish initiative. In your capacity as a church leader, you can build bridges between parish stakeholders and provide space, and opportunities for everyone to work together.