



Book Reviews

Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins (eds.), *Rural Life and Rural Church Theological and Empirical Perspectives* (London: Equinox, 2012), pp. 367. ISBN: 978-1-84553-983-2 (hbk) and 978-1-84553-984-9 (pbk).
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Few books are written on the rural church and this alone makes *Rural Life and Rural Church* a noteworthy publication. After the publication of *Faith in the City* (1985) the Church of England commissioned a further report on rural areas, *Faith in the Countryside* (1990). For a time it seemed that this was the high watermark of the church's engagement with the problems and issues of rural areas.

However, 10 years ago Professor Leslie Francis and his colleague Professor Mandy Robbins responded to an invitation from the Rural Theology Association (founded in the late 1970s) to launch a new journal concerned with the interdisciplinary and interdenominational research and scholarship concerned with the ministry and mission of the churches in rural areas. This book is a compilation of work published in the journal *Rural Theology* in its first 10 years. As such the book forms a fascinating Reader with a wide variety of contributions and authors. It is ecumenical in character; many of the contributions reflect the work of the churches in Wales.

This diverse collection of 31 essays covers a wide range of interests and concerns. It is held together by the work of Professor Leslie Francis and those who have worked with him over the past 10 years. As a consequence, many of the contributions reflect his approach and his method of analysis. Although it draws on several disciplines, it has a strong statistical base – 765 church visitors reported on their experience of a variety of country churches; as did 107 visitors to the shrine of St Melangel at Pennant Melangel; another team analysed the experience of 514 visitors to St David's Cathedral.

The diversity of the contributions is both part of the attraction of such a book, although it makes it difficult to summarize the contents and to convey an overall picture of such a wide range of data. What gives the book its distinctiveness and holds it together is the common approach of relating theological reflection to sociological observation, for which Professor Francis is well known.

Whilst urban theology has long been marked by a contextual approach, much that has been written on the countryside and its church has been historical or the result of participant observation reminiscent of the early work of social anthropologists. This study rests firmly on an 'evidence-based' approach, even if in some cases the statistical base is not extensive.

The wide diversity of the 31 contributors is considerable for it includes essays on the place of rural theology in the Old Testament, the countryside background to

Jesus' life and ministry, the encounter with New Age spirituality, the history of an individual rural parish and an analysis of burn-out and stress among rural clergy. There is a chapter which uses the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire to determine the attitude of rural clergy to their parish and their work.

However, the central chapters of the book are grouped under the theme of listening – to visitors; to the rural community; to church goers and church leaders. It is the evidence taken from many people involved in many aspects of church life and the rural community which is the principal interest and the distinctive feature of this book. There are 15,000 churches in rural areas in England and Wales belonging to seven major denominations, of which approximately 10,000 are Anglican. Although the rural population (9.8 million) represents less than 20 per cent of the total, the proportion of people in rural areas who are actively involved in the local church is significantly higher than in urban areas. Most people would acknowledge that the church in a rural settlement matters and that the absence of an active church gives a village a sense of loss and diminishment.

It is over 20 years since *Faith in the Countryside* was published. There has been only a modest follow-up to the analytical leads indicated in that work. Professor Francis is to be congratulated on the editorship of *Rural Theology* and on the production of this interesting compendium of essays. Along with other parts of the church, the rural church is in constant need of the sort of analysis and re-examination which leads to new initiatives in ministry and mission. For this the tools and insights provided by the contributors to this book are of the greatest help.

The Right Reverend Dr Anthony Russell
Oxford

Ann Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say that I Am? Answers from the Pews* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 214, £55, ISBN 978-1-4094-2535-9.
doi:10.1017/S1740355313000107

This highly engaging and thought-provoking book should generate soul-searching across the Church of England and beyond. It offers a welcome 'compare and contrast' exercise between what the Christian tradition has said and says about Jesus and what is actually believed by many at grassroots level: 'ordinary Christology'. Published as part of Ashgate's 'Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology' series it is fascinating, disturbing and at times infuriating.

The book represents the doctoral research of Ann Christie, now Senior Lecturer in Theology and Ministry at York St John University, England. She conducted in-depth interviews with 45 church-goers in four rural North Yorkshire congregations, none of whom has received much if any formal theological instruction. Each interview generated around 15–20 pages of single spaced transcript, and one gets the impression that for both interviewees and interviewer they were immensely rich conversations.