



Christian Rural Concern: Ahead of the Game | John Whitehead and Martin Hodson

In the early 1980s a group of Anglican priests became strongly aware that rural communities were undergoing fundamental changes because of economic pressures, the effects of global marketing and the disintegration of the traditional communal bonds. This came just at the time when effective clergy provision in the countryside was contracting. Rev Tony Hodgson, while working at a Youth Centre in the Staffordshire Peak District, drew together a group of fellow enthusiasts to set up a Christian Rural Centre in the small settlement of Calton, the first Christian Rural Concern (CRuC).

This venture acquired a more structured basis when CRuC formed a partnership with the Continuing and Professional Education Department at Keele University. The study course then, as now, is open to all and has become a two year part-time Certificate validated by the university, set at first year undergraduate level. CRuC and its courses have attracted a wide spectrum of lay people and clergy; its membership has included Methodists, Roman Catholics, Salvation Army officers, and Church of England Readers!

While supporting rural studies has been central to CRuC, it has always maintained a wider focus. There are 'Field Days' which are spread around the country, the journal *Countrywide Care* is produced, and local initiatives like the Companions group in North Staffs/ South Cheshire began. Its immersion in rural experience means that it can provide material for course modules. The aims of this article will be first to briefly consider the latest CRuC research project, and secondly to outline our current distance learning courses.

CHRISTIAN RURAL CONCERN'S PRESENT RESEARCH PROJECT

One of the original challenges which inspired CRuC has become more serious: the decreasing number of clergy in rural communities. While pastoral oversight has inevitably diminished, increasing fabric, financial and practical burdens having to

be shouldered by local church officers has meant retrenchment and decline. A trio of CRuC clergy have undertaken a project in conjunction with a team based at Ripon College Cuddesdon to investigate not only the practical realities on the ground, but also the necessary re-modelling of an inclusive ministry which must follow. This has critical implications if governing concepts of ministry are no longer adequate to the present situation. As nowadays the primary contacts, what is lay leaders' understanding of their role? The response of *The Reader* readers would be enormously valuable! Please contact Rev John Whitehead at: jbwhitehead@onetel.com

PARTNERS: THE JOHN RAY INITIATIVE AND CRES (CHRISTIAN RURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES)

In the early 2000s CRuC were joined by the John Ray Initiative (JRI) in a new partnership which totally revamped the CRuC course. JRI is an educational charity bringing together scientific and Christian understanding of the environment. Formed in 1997, JRI was established to respond to the environmental crisis and challenges of sustainable development and environmental stewardship. As a result of this collaboration Christian Rural and Environmental Studies (CRES) was born. In the mid 2000s CRES moved from its old home at Keele University to Ripon College Cuddesdon (RCC), an Anglican training college near Oxford. RCC now provides quality control for the course and facilities for many of the associated CRES meetings. The CRES courses are now independently managed by a Steering Group with representatives from CRuC and JRI. One of CRuC's pioneers, John Neal, a farmer near Banbury, chairs the Group, and the courses are led by the Principal Tutor, Dr Martin Hodson, who is also the Operations Manager of JRI.

The CRES Certificate is a distance learning course helping people put interests in rural issues and the environment together with their Christian faith. There are no entry qualifications. A key feature is local study and investigation, supported by a

qualified local tutor. Under the guidance of local tutors, participants on the Certificate are led through six modules out of ten from: The Living World; Rural and Environmental Theology, Farming and Food; Christians as Salt and Light; Globalisation and Faith; The Physical Environment; The Biological Environment; Rural Communities; The Church in the Countryside; and Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide Stabilization, Energy and Climate. Students write study papers and a work diary, one for each module. In the final year of the course, students work on a project, the topic being chosen in consultation with the tutors. Throughout the year, CRES runs a variety of events for students and tutors. One day events are held at RCC, as are residential two day gatherings, where students and tutors can meet each other and discuss the ongoing work. CRES organises at least one visiting speaker, with talks across the range of rural and environmental issues and theology. For some years now CRES has run summer field trips around England. These visits vary from farms to woodlands, from urban to very rural, with different content each year. At the residential meeting final year students present their projects, with topics ranging from climate change to the role of the rural church in working with the elderly.

Once completed, the CRES Certificate can be followed by a two year Diploma, also undertaken on a part time basis. This is an in depth study of a topic that is decided in consultation with tutors, and involves the production of a larger piece of work.

For further information about the CRES courses please contact: Mrs Lynda McKeown, The John Ray Initiative, QW212, Francis Close campus, Swindon Road, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL50 4AZ. Tel: 012 4271 4842. Email: admin@jri.org.uk Also visit www.cres.org.uk

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