



# Village Link

village  
hope

Spring 2019

Editor – Tim Prince



## Church and mission

As I write, the Brexit saga is about to resume after the short break over Easter. Our leaders are seemingly struck with confusion (Deuteronomy 28:28) and our nation divided, with many fearful of the future.

More than ever, we surely need to pray for all in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2), that in this, and all matters, they will 'decree what is just' and 'govern justly' (Proverbs 8:15-16).

Yet, signs of spring are all around, reminding us again of the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord, whose mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

By the time you read this, we shall have held our annual conference and celebration of the centenary of the founding in 1919 of our predecessor organisation, the Friends Evangelistic Band - another reminder of the Lord's faithfulness.

Above all, we have just again celebrated the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ - the basis of our living hope (1 Peter 1:3) and promise of eternal life (Romans 8:11).

The theme for this issue of Village Link is 'rural church and mission'. It includes an introduction to our Village Schools Project and to our newly appointed

Schools Development Worker, Laura Toomer and a report on a visit to Braintree Evangelical Church in March.

Also in this issue are good-news stories from Somerset and Yorkshire and an introduction to the resources for rural mission offered by our friends at Rural Mission Solutions.

My own article outlines reasons why I believe there is 'a hope and a future' for rural church and mission in Britain.

Finally, see if you can get your head round the biblical word search with a twist on the back page!

**Peter Caruthers, Executive Director**

In complete contrast to last year, spring has brightened our lives and our gardens and roadsides across the country with wonderful colour and warmth.

'The winter is past; the rains are over and gone'; the writer



of the Song of Songs is not giving a British weather forecast, but is conveying a sense of relief and joy at the new season.

This edition of Village Link also seeks to lift our spirits with a review of some of the good-news stories that we are involved with around the country. Jesus is building His church, even in the villages!

**Tim Prince**





# Signs of hope

by Peter Carruthers

**A common perception of rural churches is of dwindling, elderly congregations meeting infrequently in cold, decaying buildings in the shadow of imminent closure. There is some truth in this. But across rural Britain, there are signs of 'a hope and a future' for rural church and many opportunities for mission. Drawing on my and others' observations, experience and analysis, I outline some of these below.**

## Creation and community

Every year, millions of people visit and thousands move to the British countryside drawn by the 'closeness to nature' and 'close-knit communities' that are the defining marks of rural areas. Neither feature makes rural areas automatically closer to the Kingdom of God than urban areas, but both can provide opportunities for church growth and mission.

As Christians celebrate God as Creator, evident in His Creation (Psalm 19:1-3; Romans 1:20) and with a plan for its future (Romans 8:19-21), they can enable people to encounter Creation in the countryside and lead them to an understanding of the Creator.

In many rural areas, the boundaries between church and community are very blurred. This is not necessarily an advantage, but it can be - especially where it reflects a strong local engagement on the part of Christians and where it makes it easier for local people to come to church.

## The numbers game

Millions of people in Britain live in rural areas. According to Government statistics, approximately 19% of the UK population is rural, split almost equally between 'rural town and fringe' (areas which may not always accord with people's intuitive sense of 'rural') and 'rural village and hamlet'.<sup>1</sup> The proportion is even higher in Wales and Northern Ireland, where nearly 20% and 33% respectively, live in villages, hamlets, isolated dwellings or open countryside.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the rural population is increasing as tens of thousands move

to the countryside in search of the 'good life' and the 'rural idyll'. 'Predominantly rural areas' of England saw net migration of 70,500 people in 2015/16<sup>3</sup>. In more accessible and better serviced rural areas, this has been accompanied by business relocations or start-ups, and much new housebuilding. These developments provide opportunities for church growth and mission. Several respondents to our 2018 Village Hope subscribers survey cited 'incomers', 'growing populations' or 'new homes' as opportunities for the growth of the Kingdom of God in their areas.

Rural areas are better served than urban areas in terms of churches per capita, and church attendance in proportion to population is higher. Two thirds of Church of England parishes, 10,000 church buildings, 42% of the clergy and 40% of worshippers (measured in average weekly attendance) are in rural areas. About 18% of rural and urban CofE churches are growing, but a smaller proportion of rural parishes (25%) are shrinking compared with their urban counterparts (29%). Overall, the number of churches of all denominations is about 1 per 1,370 people in England as a whole,<sup>4</sup> compared with 1 per 650 people in rural England.<sup>5</sup> However, despite higher per capita attendance, this means that congregations remain small and often inviable.

## No one wants to shut up shop

Nevertheless, there is a determination in many of these small congregations and among church hierarchies to keep churches open. This is another sign of hope - although not always.

For the Church of England, closing parish churches means abandoning its aspiration of being a 'Christian presence in every community'. Some dioceses are recognising the importance of 'saving the rural church', as evidenced, for example, by a £1 million award to Exeter Diocese's 'Growing the Rural Church' project.<sup>6</sup>

Anglicans generally stay in their parishes and rural 'commuter churches' are rare.

In contrast, many independent, rural chapels are kept open by congregations consisting almost entirely of commuters. Some, but by no means all, who attend may have historical associations with the village. I remember speaking to a farmer at a rural Baptist church after a service I had taken, looking out of the window at the fields he had farmed for many years. Age and infirmity meant he had retired to a nearby town, but returned to the chapel when it was able to hold a service. The rest of the congregation had also travelled in from elsewhere. Sadly, that chapel is now a private dwelling.

Many of these chapels have spent years seeking to reach out to the local community, but seen little fruit. There is no simple answer: some may find hope in the new approaches and opportunities described here; for some there may be a thriving church up the road; others may need to recognise that it is time to shake the dust off their feet (Matthew 10:14).

## New ways of 'doing church'

Rural areas have seen many new approaches to church and mission in recent years.





Important among these are 'resourcing churches', 'hubs' or 'minsters'. As Tim Wyatt, writing in the Church Times, put it, "the rural resource-church model seeks to use a larger, thriving church as the hub for a group of smaller churches, which can learn from, and share in, the wealth, personnel, staffing, and energy of the central congregation".<sup>7</sup>

One of the best examples is the Fountain of Life in Ashill, Norfolk, the story of which featured in our 2017 Conference edition of Village Link. Fountain of Life aims to provide a 'framework of church that is not centred around buildings, institution, hierarchy and clergy, but rather seeks to mobilise and resource all to evangelism and discipleship in rural Norfolk'.<sup>8</sup>

Many new approaches to church (primarily Anglican and Methodist) are clustered within the idea and movement of 'Fresh Expressions'.<sup>9</sup>

Fresh Expressions can be network churches, or constructed around shared interests (eg hiking), particular locations (eg old people's homes), specific demographics (eg children, youth) or forms of ministry or mission (eg 'Messy church'). A central theme in nearly all cases is 'taking church to the people rather than getting people to come to church'.

In the very rural diocese of Carlisle, there are at least 99 examples of Fresh Expressions, according to the Diocese's 'Fresh Expressions Enabler', Richard Passmore<sup>10</sup>, some of which, like 'Mountain Pilgrims'<sup>11</sup>, have a distinctively rural flavour.

'The Filling Station' resources monthly mid-week evening 'celebration' meetings in non-church venues at 99 locations across the UK. Many of these are in rural locations. According to their website, "Christian communities have grown in depth and numbers where a Filling Station has been opened".<sup>12</sup>

### Being 'out of church' may be an opportunity

Across Britain, there are increasing numbers of Christians who are 'out of church', including many in rural areas. There are many different reasons for this. For some it may be a matter of geography; others may have reacted to what they believe are heterodox teachings promoted by their former churches.

While this may seem a problem, it may also be an opportunity, as such believers start to gather in new, intentional, local configurations that reflect their contexts and concerns.

### New uses for old buildings

Even church buildings can be a sign of hope, especially where they have been transformed from burdens to blessings!

As Graham Dow, former Bishop of Carlisle, commented, in rural areas, "the church building is valued" and is a "sign of God's presence and of the welcoming community of God's people, especially if it is open"<sup>13</sup>.

At St Peter's, Peterchurch, Herefordshire, a re-ordering of the building has turned the nave into a library, cafe and general-purpose community centre, while keeping the chancel for worship.<sup>14</sup> The change has drawn many into the church building and serves the village community in many ways (although I do not know whether or not it has resulted in any church growth or making disciples).

### Schools, children and youth

Many villages still have schools. They are often the only remaining central point in the community. And many will open their doors to local volunteer workers to share in leading assemblies, RE teaching, after-school Bible clubs and 'prayer spaces'. Our own 'Village Schools Project' is seeking to realise such opportunities in S E Wales.<sup>15</sup> There are other such initiatives across the country.<sup>16</sup>

More generally, many see working with children and youth as the most promising opportunity for serving the community and for mission. Nearly a quarter of respondents to our 2018 Village Hope subscribers survey cited 'children and youth' as opportunities for the growth of the Kingdom of God in their areas.

### Prayer

Finally, as Graham Dow writes, "developing a culture of prayer in rural churches is hard work, but vital to the growth of the gospel".<sup>17</sup> The growth of the prayer movement in recent years is surely a sign of hope for believers everywhere. In the rural context, we have seen encouraging growth in our own rural-focused prayer initiatives, ie our prayer partners, the Village Hope Fellowship and the Hope for the Countryside partnership.

As we see these signs of hope, the challenge for all concerned with church and mission in rural Britain is to discern where the 'fields are white' (John 4:35) and where the Father is working, and to know how to work with him (John 5:17).

<sup>1</sup> [tinyurl.com/UKnumbers](http://tinyurl.com/UKnumbers)

<sup>2</sup> [tinyurl.com/vhruralstats](http://tinyurl.com/vhruralstats)

<sup>3</sup> [tinyurl.com/defarrural2019](http://tinyurl.com/defarrural2019)

<sup>4</sup> [tinyurl.com/churchstats](http://tinyurl.com/churchstats)

<sup>5</sup> [tinyurl.com/ruralchurchgrowth](http://tinyurl.com/ruralchurchgrowth)

<sup>6</sup> [tinyurl.com/exeterrural](http://tinyurl.com/exeterrural)

<sup>7</sup> [tinyurl.com/wyattrural](http://tinyurl.com/wyattrural)

<sup>8</sup> [folchurch.co.uk](http://folchurch.co.uk)

<sup>9</sup> [freshexpressions.org.uk](http://freshexpressions.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> [tinyurl.com/freshcumbria](http://tinyurl.com/freshcumbria)

<sup>11</sup> [tinyurl.com/mountainpilgrims](http://tinyurl.com/mountainpilgrims)

<sup>12</sup> [thefillingstation.org.uk](http://thefillingstation.org.uk)

<sup>13</sup> Dow, G, 2015. *Leading real churches for growth*. Grove Books, Cambridge. Page 4.

<sup>14</sup> [hubcommunity.org](http://hubcommunity.org); [tinyurl.com/peterchurchfilm](http://tinyurl.com/peterchurchfilm)

<sup>15</sup> [villagehope.uk/rural-schools-project/](http://villagehope.uk/rural-schools-project/)

<sup>16</sup> See - Orme, Rona, 2015. *Children and young people*. In: Hopkinson, J, *Resourcing Rural Ministry*. Bible Reading Fellowship, Abingdon. Gibson, T, 2010. *Church and countryside*. SCM Press, London

<sup>17</sup> Dow, G, 2015. *Leading real churches for growth*. Grove Books, Cambridge. Page 24.

Photo by Abigail Anastasia Photography



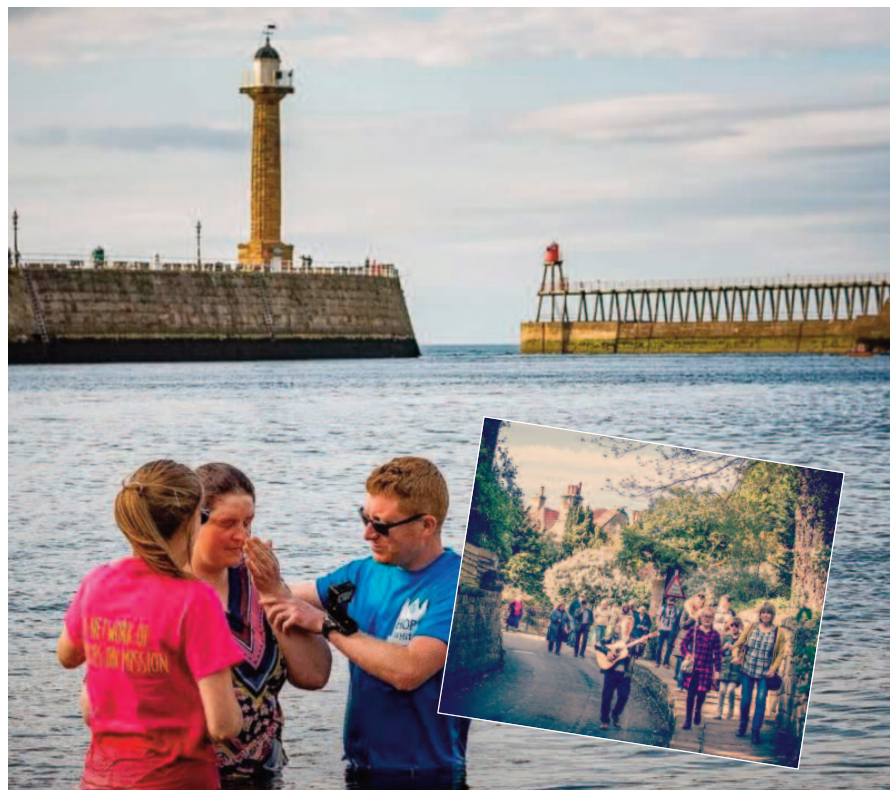
# Gospel hope on the north-east coast

by Tim Prince

Hope Whitby is a 'Missional Community' headed up by Leigh and Rebecca Coates in the harbour town of Whitby in North Yorkshire. They sum up their mission with the words of Jesus: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

Their goal is to "take the Gospel to every nook and cranny" of Whitby, and to do this they create spaces in the community where people can come to experience the love of Jesus and become disciples who, in turn, make disciples. "We don't have a building of our own, and we don't meet together on a Sunday, but we try to meet people where they are, whether that be in a cafe, a pub, a house or a church building," says Leigh. "We are trying to give everyone a chance to experience the Christian faith in a way that they can understand, so we have lots of different things going on. We give people a sense of belonging, which is why a number of our groups are in houses. We have a social area, called the Hope Hub, where people can come, relax and enjoy an evening with friends. And once a month we have a contemporary service called #Gathering."

Leigh, Rebecca and their team have seen Hope Whitby grow from



just five people in 2010 to 19 "missional communities", which reach around 150 people face-to-face each month. Many more are in regular contact through social media. Recent Alpha courses have led to baptisms, as well as challenging people on the fringes to think more deeply about God, faith and what that means for their individual lives.

"It is such a welcoming community," said Rebecca Pearson, Mayor of Whitby and active member of one of the missional communities. "Seeing children having so much fun is wonderful."

All the members of the Hope team except Leigh are 'bi-vocational' by choice as well as necessity, believing that their secular employment allows them to be firmly rooted in the local community that they are serving. The team are conscious of their own need for accountability and have strong links with Ebenezer Baptist Church in Scarborough, as well as personal mentors. Each member of the team has a specific role, with monthly meetings to review their work, plan ahead and pray for one another. As a result, Leigh has been able to use some of his time to help plant

missional communities down the coast in Filey, as well as extend the work of Hope Whitby to some of the surrounding rural villages.

The village missional communities operate on an intimate level, building trust and enabling those who have not yet come to faith to feel more comfortable in exploring Christianity. The communities train up leaders who will then go and plant new community groups once numbers in their group get too large.

At present, there are four village missional communities, including one in the village of Stainsacre, where Village Hope Fellowship Members Stephen and Therese Tinnion live. "Since moving and becoming a part of Hope Whitby, we have found that our way of looking at church has completely changed. The emphasis on decentralised community, family and closeness, and simply being, rather than keeping lots of activities going, has been liberating for us."

For more information, see [www.equip4.org](http://www.equip4.org), 'The Forgotten Ways' by Alan Hurst (2016, Brazos Press), and 'Reimagine Church' by Nic Harding (2018, Missio Publishing LLC).

# Gathering for Prayer

by Tim Prince

Nobody in the church in the countryside can doubt the value of praying together and spending time with other like-minded Christians. There is something about being in one accord that brings joy to the heart and encouragement to the soul, and a recent Prayer and Fellowship Day at Braintree did both.

Village Hope Fellowship Members travelled from Monmouthshire, Worcestershire, Cambridgeshire, Kent and Norfolk to gather with local Christians from across central Essex and Suffolk for the occasion. Nearly thirty people sat in a large circle of chairs in the hall at Braintree Evangelical Church to worship and pray together. During the introductions Deana Little shared that she had been brought to faith by evangelists from the Friends Evangelistic Band (FEB), our predecessor organisation, in the early days of the Braintree Mission, and Stella Lam told of her conversion at age 11 on an FEB summer camp in Great Yarmouth.

Keith Ives, pastor of Braintree Evangelical Church, shared his great

concern for 'the prodigals', those from church families who had drifted away and left a generational gap in the church's make up. He appealed for labourers to go into the harvest field, citing the housing estate around the church that needed the Lord so badly, and for families to move into the church to help revitalise all areas of life and outreach. Christians from villages surrounding Braintree echoed these concerns.

Sam Brinkley from Burston reported that a number of local chapels in Norfolk were closing, but that there was a sense of blessing, renewal and replenishment accompanying these closures. He illustrated this with a picture of the oilseed rape fields that surround his village - oilseed rape must first die off before it can be harvested. He asked for prayer that they might recognise where God is at work in the village and have the courage to respond to that.

Charlie and Lynette Galiszewski from Sudbury shared their own situation in a small church meeting in a school. They asked God to change situations that had persisted stubbornly for

many years. They also brought their concerns about the massive number of 'out-of-church' Christians they were aware of; their prayer was that they find their way back into fellowship in one form or other.

Peter Carruthers finished the session with an appeal to keep the 'altar of incense' - the prayers of the saints - alight at all times, even when it was difficult to know how to pray. Perhaps, like Zechariah, we might suddenly be surprised by the presence of an angel! He also said that, in these circumstances, it was important to set things in order, like Elijah on Mount Carmel, who called out to God at the hour of the evening sacrifice, and only after the altar had been carefully prepared.

Our thanks to all who worked hard to make the day such a success. As Keith summarised, "It was a day well spent and there was a mutual encouragement in the Lord."





# Messing around in Somerset

by Margaret Sims



At the beginning of 2017, only two children attended the Parish Church in Pawlett each month, but there was a small Sunday School at the Methodist Chapel in the village. The possibility of starting Messy Church, an ambitious undertaking for a small village, was explored, but there was insufficient support for such a big project at that time. Much prayer was offered locally for the churches, the needs of the children and for our ecumenical relationships in the community.

The option of starting a Messy Church as an after-school club at the local primary school began to emerge. The aim would be to offer children an encounter with Jesus and the gospel, to be fun and to allow them to grow

as a family. It was seen as a missional outreach, with the hope that it might create a link with families and the wider village community. The need for a wide prayer network of support was also deemed of first importance.

At the end of the Summer Term 2017 a wonderful ecumenical team of six came forward to set up Messy Church Club in Pawlett Primary School. It began, aided and encouraged by Morey, our Deanery Mission Enabler, with 9 children in October 2017 while the school was in special measures.

By its second term there were 14 children attending and we put on an Easter Special for family and friends in the village hall. This event was a great

success, very well supported and enjoyed by all, and we were able to make a small gift to a village charity as a result of one of the activities. As Messy Church Club (MCC) continued throughout the terms, the numbers rose to 22 children. We sought and have received some funding which has enabled growth, and we have gone on to hold Christmas Special events.

The club is now thriving; its members are enthusiastic and totally absorbed by the stories presented very differently by the individual team members. The MCC children have grown in their relationship with God and the Christian life. Fellowship amongst the volunteers has also grown tremendously; we rely on each other for support and encouragement. MCC is surrounded by prayer from all parts of the country (many thanks to Village Hope for spreading the need for prayer). Prayer support is a great comfort and reassurance for the team, and our continued thanks go to all the faithful who pray for the children and the team of MCC in Pawlett.

## Rural Mission Solutions

by Gordon Banks, Chairman, Rural Mission Solutions

Whether your interest is in adult or in children's ministry, there is no single solution that fits all. Each village, and each church, is unique. Drawing on practice and research in rural mission and evangelism over 50 years throughout Britain, we use 21st Century technology as we seek to reverse past spiritual decline in the rural areas of the UK.

Having worked with several hundred rural churches across Britain, from across the denominations, running short-term evangelistic missions, we



now use the power and ease of the Internet to run regular short information and training webinars on a range of helpful and relevant topics to assist rural churches to be effective in mission.

We have developed, and are expanding, a library of free

information and training resources that enable us to offer appropriate support for rural churches anywhere and at any time.

Those who would rather speak to a person can have one-to-one consultations by phone or video.

We also run a bespoke One-Day Consultation for groups of churches, Deaneries, Circuits or Dioceses.

Find our more:

[info@ruralmissions.org.uk](mailto:info@ruralmissions.org.uk)

[www.RuralMissionSolutions.org.uk](http://www.RuralMissionSolutions.org.uk)





# Making the most of an open door

by Laura Toomer

**As I left a small school in rural Wales yesterday afternoon, following an hour's lesson, my feelings were jumbled. I have been teaching the Old Testament 'Walk Through the Bible' programme to thirty 9-11 year olds this term: that day we had been covering the book of Exodus, and not one child in the class had ever heard of the man called Moses.**

At the end, a pupil asked me if I believed in God, and why, and I was privileged to be able to give an answer. Because of the baffled way she was looking at me, I asked her in return if she found it an 'unnatural idea' to have faith, and then the whole row of



children started nodding vigorously! They seemed to think of Christians as rather bizarre alien figures – but now they are getting to know me, just as 'Laura'. I confess I drove home a little shocked and saddened: I shouldn't be shocked, knowing how little value is given to God in most of society today; I should, however, be saddened. It is not right or just that a generation of children in our country is growing up hearing little or nothing of the gospel. I also had a seed of excitement and hope in me: by the end of my five weeks, and through the continuing presence of a newly set-up local assembly team, this group of children will hear and know the great Bible story, and will have a chance to meet professing Christians and realize that faith is something that isn't perhaps so far away.

The 'Village Schools Project' (a partnership between Village Hope and ICE Wales Trust) has made a good start in the first quarter of this year. I have found volunteers in village

communities around South-East Wales willing to pray and to join teams, to take advantage of the open door into our schools. Schools still welcome help and support with assemblies, RE lessons, events and extra-curricular clubs, and they love to have visitors, demonstrating good links with their communities. My aim, as an experienced youth and children's worker, is to support local Christians and churches to develop their ministry in schools, working alongside them until they are ready to take it on alone. I am very grateful for Village Hope's vision and commitment to this work in bringing the gospel to children, who may otherwise never hear or see it.

Reading through Luke's gospel recently, I have been reminded of Jesus' instructions to welcome children, learn from them, and to pray for God to send more workers into his harvest field. Engaging in schools work appears to be a fitting response, and one that more and more Christians are taking up. Some are joining an 'Open the Book' team, acting out Bible stories in assemblies; some are organizing and administrating teams or events; some are sewing or sourcing costumes; some are gathering to pray, and some are using their local contacts and relationships to introduce workers into a new school. It can be overwhelming when confronted with the need, but also so encouraging to look at the response around me, and around the country as a whole. And as with Moses, and Joshua - that's next week's lesson - we can know that the Lord God Almighty travels with us and will reveal his greatness.

See: [villagehope.uk/rural-schools-project](http://villagehope.uk/rural-schools-project); [www.bible.org.uk](http://www.bible.org.uk);  
[www.biblesociety.org.uk/openthebook](http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/openthebook); [www.icewales.co.uk](http://www.icewales.co.uk);  
[www.content.scriptureunion.org.uk](http://www.content.scriptureunion.org.uk)





**Numbers**  
**Bible word search**

D	R	Y	B	1	S	2	W
E	8	E	T	S	F	E	A
A	T	S	6	I	Y	T	7
10	H	O	S	M	3	1	I
A	R	H	E	U	9	S	N
N	1	T	A	S	H	8	G
T	A	10	T	I	R	W	S
S	R	E	T	S	A	M	2

**ANSWERS**

ATONE, DRY BONES, EATEN, HEIGHT, NINEVEH, ONESIMUS, SEVENTY, STONE, THRONE, TWO MASTERS, TWO FISH, WAS EVENING, WEIGHTS, TENT, TENANTS, TENTH, WRITTEN

**Giving to Village Hope**

Hitherto, we have offered Village Link free of charge, and we would like to continue to do so. However, as we are sure you will understand, publishing Village Link incurs costs of printing and postage, as well as appreciable staff time.

Please will you consider giving towards the costs of producing this magazine and towards the wider work of Village Hope. You can give by cheque, or via BACS, using the enclosed form. If you are a tax payer and complete the Gift Aid declaration, this will enable us to claim an additional 25p for every £1 you donate.

**One-off or occasional gifts are much appreciated, but please consider becoming a 'Village Hope Seed Sower'. Seed Sowers share in our ministry through regular giving; this will enable us to extend Village Hope's work of mobilising prayer, advancing understanding and supporting and strengthening churches in rural Britain.**

**About Village Hope**

Village Hope is a Christian charity with a remit for churches and communities in rural Britain.

Our charitable purpose is "to proclaim and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in the villages of Britain, in order to establish effective Christian witness, and to encourage and enable Bible teaching, prayer, worship and evangelism in village churches".

We believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope to all humanity, for this life and the life to come, and that the Bible both sets forth the way of salvation through faith in Jesus and offers a way to live and a coherent vision and timeless values for society.

Village Hope is a member of the Evangelical Alliance, and its staff and trustees affirm the Evangelical Alliance's Basis of Faith.

We also believe that Christians, especially those who live in rural areas, have a special privilege and responsibility as stewards of God's creation to celebrate and care for His land and His earth, which He created and sustains.

Our objective is to encourage, strengthen, support and resource those who seek to live a Christian life, serve their communities, and witness to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Britain's villages.

