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Future Perspectives for the International Rural Church Association

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(Jerry began by explaining some of the resources available from the Arthur Rank Centre, and said that the Germinate Enterprise programme and Germinate Groups learning communities had international value. He encouraged delegates to sign up to the free eNews. See www.germenate.net for details of this and other resources.)

We have seen a lot of change since those 95 theses were posted on a door 500 years ago.

But the speed of change is getting faster and we are likely to see more change in the next 50 years than in the last 500 years.

Gordon Moore was the first person to notice that computing power doubles and costs halve every 18-20 months. He thought it would last 10 years but "Moore's law" has already lasted 60 years. This is exponential change. The effect is extraordinary. To give just one example, the Tsunami wave of innovation overwhelmed Kodak, a hundred year old \$28bn 140,000 company. Facebook is now the business giant in the memory market, worth over \$300bn with 13,000 staff. 10x the market value with one tenth of the staff. The rate of change is hugely disruptive and also brings massive benefit. The apps on my smartphone would cost you \$900k if you tried to buy this technology in the 1980s.

But the pace of change is continuing to get faster. Several technologies are at the point of creating massive change with both benefit and disruption: the internet of things; artificial intelligence; robotics; Genomics. Biotechnology is accelerating at 5 times the speed of Moore's law: doubling in power and halving in price every 4 months. In 1995 they thought it would take 50 years and \$15bn to sequence the first human genome. Now it takes a few hours and costs \$1,000.

This will change society and we live ever longer. And artificial intelligence and robotics will not just impact unskilled workers but professionals such lawyers and doctors. Already robots are safer conducting some operations than surgeons.

It's not just technology. We are changing our mind on social issues faster than ever before. In 1787, PA allowed interracial marriage, the first US state to do so. It wasn't until 1967, 180 years later, that it was legal everywhere. In 2004, Massachusetts removed the ban on same sex marriages; last year, just 11 years later, it became same sex marriage became legal everywhere.

Through all this, most rural areas of Europe might look as though they have escaped change. There might be new housing, and a few satellite dishes, but the oldest parts of villages, in the main, look much the same on the outside. But of course we cannot escape the changes around us and there has been massive change in rural communities.

- Poverty: e.g. 70% of the rural Romania is classified as poor
- Young and working age people have moved to cities for work
- High transport and energy costs
- Public transport is poor if it exists at all, leaving those without a car isolated and struggling to access services.
- Local shops and services are disappearing; these are often community meeting points
- Cell phone and Internet access may be poor
- Massive decline in direct agricultural employment in many countries
- Holiday homes may be a problem, leaving villages empty out of season.
- The local church may have closed or the priest's time shared with several other churches.
- Regime change in Eastern Europe.

But there is good news too.

- Poverty is falling in many areas. Here's what the Newspaper India Today wrote in 2010:
"Islands of poverty still exist but most of rural India is transformed beyond imagination thanks to a host of factors which has put unprecedented wealth into the hands of farmers across the country and turned it into a huge consumer market
We have a growing service industry and alternate revenue channels from horticulture, poultry, fisheries and other activities which are less rain-dependant and were virtually non-existent a decade ago. India's 6m villages, which harbour 72% of the population, once the abattoir around its neck, are now the signpost to its future"
- Cell phones and the Internet are transformational. Sub-Saharan Africa has more than 650 million mobile phone subscribers. As a result, farmers have access to market prices so they can negotiate better deals; they have access to weather forecasting and micro-insurance to insure against poor weather; and they have cell phone apps such as iCow that track each cow's gestation and feed schedules.
- Even with this material progress, rural people recognise that material wealth isn't everything. Human flourishing is much more than merely money. Here's what BBC reporter Caroline Juler wrote in 2011:

Life is tough in rural Romania. EU statistics say that nearly half the people here are living on or below the poverty line. If you think everyone is miserable, though, you are wrong. I was staying on a farm that supported seven people, three generations of one family. The house had no hot water or fridge and the lavatory was a compost latrine in the garden. But there was plenty of food and I have rarely met people with such a zest for living.

- Moving back to a lay-led model of church is more Biblical and can release resources and energy
- There are opportunities for 'fresh expressions'
- Church members are often embedded in their communities and able to be a blessing to their neighbours.
- Bibles are now available in thousands of languages and Christian material is available on the Internet and over satellite TV channels.

So why does IRCA exist? Why did God call men and women of God to form this association?

There are massive differences between countries: different levels of wealth, different attitudes to the Christian faith, different understandings of what the church is.

However, there are some common themes to rural life and mission and therefore there is value in this international fellowship, in three broad ways that are different but inextricably linked.

1) Voice for the voiceless

A voice standing up for

- Rural interests in the face of urban political power and interests
- Farmers facing natural disasters, low prices, late EU payments, etc
- Marginalised groups in the countryside including poverty which in the UK can be hidden
- Rural and environmental values: what legacy do we want to leave of children and grandchildren – fast travel, cheap food and global warming or unspoilt countryside and bio-diversity?

Implications for IRCA

- How can and should we be involved in advocacy on these issues?
- How can we enable local churches to provide practical support for farmers, marginalised groups, rural interests and the environment?

(2) Supporting the rural church

There is a need to:

- Develop men and women of God who are collaborative leaders able to release the ministry of lay people. In many denominations in many countries, a key challenge is multi-church ministry. A solution is for all church members to be more priestly (a key reformation value); priests to be more episcopal; and bishops to be more apostolic.

- Change the narrative of the rural church (“a satsuma is not a failed orange”). The rural church is a great place to be – in UK, growing same as urban; fresh expressions; imbedded; opportunities!
- Implications
- Training and other resources and materials (At ARC... Germinate Leadership; discipleship materials; research project, some relevant beyond UK)
 - Raising the profile and perception of the rural church in Christian structures, colleges and media e.g. at ARC, Queens College, RMS, Germinate Conference; etc.

In passing: one of things we teach at the ARC is about leadership styles. Jesus used different leadership styles at different stages and we need to choose an appropriate leadership style for each situation.

(3) Supporting rural mission

When it is working well, nothing on earth is as powerful as the local church to bring spiritual, social and physical blessing to their community, i.e.

Implications

- Sharing resources
- Encouragement and fellowship
- Encourage to be creative and take risks.

In passing, the early church was a risk taking church: consider Stephen and Paul. Have we today become too risk adverse? We need pioneers and entrepreneurs, such as Heidi and Rolland Baker who took massive risks to meet needs in Mozambique and this opened to way to extraordinary spiritual fruit.

If these three things are the **why** we exist, broadly **how** is IRCA going to do this?

- Conferences
- Resource hub
 - Learning communities
 - Enterprise
 - Other
- eNews

- Engagement and advocacy
- Grow membership through the above

And **what** specifically are we doing?

Lincoln 2018: learning community approach

- to encourage country participation
- to model learning communities

Funding

Web development

Let me finish with a story – a parable of sorts – which on the surface is nothing to do with the rural church and yet there are many lessons and parallels (see slides). Lessons for rural church leaders:

- Identify needs
- identify resources
- Set goals
- Work with others
- With others, discern the way forward
- Take a risk
- Keep on communicating
- Keep on praying
- Persist
- The fruit comes from God not our efforts.

A final thought: do one audacious new thing each year and enjoy the ride!