

## **Abstract**

**Title: Hope for the Rural Church? The promise of growth in a rural Church of Ireland context.**

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This dissertation highlights the necessity for the Church of Ireland to engage in church growth in rural areas. In doing so, the research will integrate contributions from the biblical, theological and practical strands relating to the subject. The objective is to demonstrate that if the task of the church is to re-imagine itself in every generation, then the rural church is no exception. Rural culture is undergoing change at near the same rate as urban culture. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that what has worked in the past will work today. The Church is a living organism that is rooted in the past through apostolic teaching and is called to live faithfully in new expressive ways in the present so that the seeds of the kingdom can be reaped in the future. If the rural church can succeed in this, growth is possible.

Chapter one introduces the research, sets the scene and outlines the methodology. Chapter two critically examines Donald McGavran's theology of church growth. Chapter three defines 'rural' and 'culture' within a sociological context. As the Church is not called to be a sect that keeps itself separate from the world, but to witness to Jesus, it is vital for the Church to know how to engage with the world. Towards this, chapter four outlines cultural challenges for rural church growth that are both intrinsic and extrinsic to the Church of Ireland. This includes a quantitative case study carried out using the attendance and membership figures obtained from the Church of Ireland Boyle and Riverstown group of parishes. Chapter five examines a strategy for the rural church to overcome the challenges and to create an environment for church growth. Chapter six seeks to offer the conclusions of the research through observations, recommendations and areas for further research.