

Helpline counsels gay farm workers in Britain

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(ENInews)--Gay people in big cities have a wide range of social or counseling options, but in the countryside, isolation is often the norm, according to chaplain Keith Ineson, whose helpline for gay farm workers is receiving increased church support.

"Most of the calls I receive are from men who are over the age of 50. Some are suicidal. When they were young, homosexual acts were illegal, so for most of their lives they've had to hide away and pretend to be what they're not. They think they're the only gays on the farm," he told ENInews.

He said that since the helpline was launched just before Christmas 2009, the response has been overwhelming. The helpline is funded by local Christian and secular groups and backed by the Arthur Rank Centre, a registered charity serving churches and the rural community.

Ineson, 59, who is a member of the Salvation Army and Churches Together in England, an ecumenical group, works as an agricultural chaplain in the town of Nantwich, South Cheshire. According to a 9 May news release from the Methodist Church, which works with the Rank Centre, "the number of calls in response to the extended support had led to a need for volunteers. Christians with rural knowledge and an understanding of gay issues are invited to get in touch with Keith if they have an interest in becoming involved with supporting the chaplaincy."

Iveson noted that "farms tend to be rather macho places and gay men feel isolated and very lonely. Some are

single, though not all. In all cases they felt they were imprisoned and in many instances the farmers were so worried about the response they might receive that they texted or emailed the helpline anonymously. Rural communities are not like cosmopolitan, urban areas: there is the assumption that gay farmers don't exist."

The Rev. Graham Jones, national rural officer for the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church at the Rank Centre, said, "farming is for many people an exciting and fulfilling industry in which to be involved. It is not without its pressures, however, and many farmers are subject to stresses and strains in their professional and personal lives," according to the Methodist church report. The Rank Centre is based in Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire.

Asked by ENInews how many gay men might be farmers or farm workers in Britain, Ineson replied: "That's impossible to say but we reckon that between 7-8 percent of all adult men in Britain are gay. I have no figures for lesbians, just for men." The National Farmers Union estimates that there are approximately 534,000 people employed full-time and part-time in agriculture in Britain.

Ineson said he applauds the fact that there are now openly gay characters in Britain's best known BBC radio drama, *The Archers*, which has an audience of five million. It calls itself "the story of every day country folk" and was started in 1951 to disseminate information to Britain's farming community. In 2004 the program featured its first gay characters -- Adam Macy and Ian Craig. A quarter of a million more Britons tuned in to *The Archers* on 14 December 2006 when Adam and Ian got married in a civil ceremony.