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“A spiritual being is a being-in-love. Being in love with nature. Being in love with God. Loving our neighbours as ourselves, and being part of the circle of friendship of animate and inanimate life.” Brother Andrew

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The Survival of Rural Communities

“Rural Decline and Resilience” and *Spirituality and Sustainability*” are two papers Brother Andrew presented to a conference on rural ministry at Lloydminster, Alberta in October 2009. Brother Andrew is a UN Advisor on Food, Water and Sustainable Development. The full text of his lectures can be found at www.circle-m.ca (Conferences & Events).

Against all Odds

Reflecting on the paper “Rural Decline and Resilience”

The odds are that a lot of us live in rural communities that suffer from decline: often because of bigger farms, closure of industry, encroaching urbanization, or environmental degradation.

Brother Andrew drew on his long experience as a UN Advisor on Food, Water and Sustainable Development to tell an October 2009 conference on rural ministry that this is where the church can have a special leadership role.

Most churches in these small communities would have already closed their doors if they didn't possess generous quantities of resiliency. It is that resilient strength that they have to offer to struggling communities.

When a community feels hopeless, the church can bring hope. It is trusted by a cross section of the community and can draw a network of interested parties together. It may have the kind of leadership, or can draw on innovative resource persons, who will help the community talk through their situation. As Brother Andrew said, “The church can help trigger the resilience response.”

The gathered network of persons can name their assets, discuss needs and consider innovative ideas.

It is important to encourage the women to talk. Ask them how they would like their land to be used. Many women own land. Many also are farmers. Most want their land to be used for the good of the community, and in a sustainable manner. Their intent is to grow food for families (not for export). They recognize that food is a vital commodity, and with value added work, can be made economically viable. These women can offer fresh insights into how to envision a future for their community.

The church can encourage both economic and spiritual revitalization. Spiritual revitalization, as will be noted in the following reflection, can make a significant difference. Participants work with passion because they understand this is their home-place, and they bring to it, their home-based understandings.

(Reflections by Joyce Sasse, January 2010)

Life-Affirming Gifts

Reflecting on the paper "Spirituality and Sustainability"

"In our present times, we believe the mighty wind of God's spirit is stirring up people's imaginations to find ways of living together, based especially on the full community of all life: including love of nature and love of the poor."

Brother Andrew quoted the above from what the Roman Catholic Bishops of Appalachia said about how agriculture and communities could be made to be sustainable through spiritual revitalization.

"These sustainable communities will conserve and not waste, be simpler but better, keep most resources circulating locally, create sustainable livelihoods, support family life, protect the richness of nature, develop people spiritually, and follow God's values ..."

First we need to "steep" our own spiritual selves, as one might steep a good pot of tea. "We are the leaves, the bodies immersed in a broth of mystery, absorbing the way of Nature and the way of the Transcendent."

Make this spirituality "a way of living and being which has informed your thoughts, your words, your choices and actions."

When people come together in the context of an enriched spiritual milieu, there can be a kindling of new life in the community.

Social, economic and agricultural improvements that are based on strong spiritual principles will result in sustainable ways for moving ahead into the coming generations.

I especially appreciated our speaker's focus on Nature being an important resource for nurturing our spiritual selves. He spoke of our "kinship with the earth", of "being one in the web of life". "Earth is like a scripture, the original word". For rural people, whose lives are so intimately tied to the land and the extended community, these words help us find a footing for moving forward in our spiritual formation.

Equipped with spiritual character, mysterious and elusive though it often seems, we are fueled to help each other look toward our long-term (sustainable) future.

"We can learn to be partners with nature and with God; with a spirituality ... that sees no contradiction between the wedding of Spirit and Earth ... This is a good space for us to be in."

(Reflections by Joyce Sasse, January 2010)

RURAL LIFE ISSUES

The Business Side Of Church

Wise advice concerning tax matters ...

Irrespective of size or location, all churches need to comply with basic government rules and filing requirements in order to maintain charitable status. This can be a real challenge for smaller and more isolated congregations, which tend to have few, if any, employees and rely mainly on volunteers. The church treasurer role can be a particularly demanding one.

It isn't often we speak well of the taxman, but in Canada, the Canada Revenue Agency is actively working on making the "business side of church" less onerous and genuinely striving to better understand the unique service needs and compliance challenges of small and rural charities. Initiatives include offering webinars, more on-line resources and streamlined reporting requirements. There is even a sample of Annual Charitable Return (T3010 B) for a small church on their website. For more information on this see <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/chrts/cmmnctn/src/menu-eng.html>

In a similar vein, at The United Church of Canada, we are working on "being easier to do business with". This involves streamlining procedures, simplifying forms, and improving the quality of on-line documentation and reference material and making it more accessible. Workshops that used to be held only in major urban centres will increasingly be available to all via webinar (internet broadcast/presentation). Whenever possible, we design for dial up internet users too. May we all live to see the day that high-speed is universal.

The goal is to reduce the burden of administration - for all, but especially small and rural churches. We welcome any comments or suggestions.

(Erik Mathiesen, Mission through Finance, The United Church of Canada)

The Rural Church – From Where I See It

Rev. David Webber, who works in an extended rural parish in the Caribou-Chilcotin Region of B.C., reports his thoughts to the Presbyterian Record after his trip to visit rural churches in New Zealand. The following is but a segment of his report.

Act and Think Interdenominationally

We have to begin to think and act interdenominationally, and by using the word interdenominational, I am not talking about the mainline church but the whole of the Christian church. There is absolutely no room for fierce denominationalism in Canada's rural areas. Interdenominational cooperative ventures have to become the norm, and to do this, it takes a huge amount of humility and love. In my context of the Cariboo-Chilcotin, especially within the close quarters and intimacy of house church, we have had to learn to love and respect and work together for Christ, in spite of a wide variety of greatly different Christian theological perspectives and practices. My theological training not only did not prepare me for this but actually trained me against it. To get through

theological school, I had to tow the line of liberal theological scholasticism, and adopt the attitude that anything substantially different was not only wrong but also intolerable. As one of my contemporaries put it just before I tried to throttle him, "It is better to have no theology than the wrong theology." To minister in an interdenominational rural setting I had to work hard to step out of this liberal fundamentalism and to learn to understand and appreciate and communicate with a wide variety of people with widely differing theologies. To do interdenominational ministry in rural Canada, we need theological institutions that are dedicated to teaching theological diversity and respect to those who will be leaders on the ground.

Develop Rural-based Theological Training

The second thing that has to change is related to the above. Rural people need to be practically equipped for ministry in their rural context. We desperately need our theological schools to begin to address this. But in addressing this, what is needed is a complete shift in thinking and practice. This shift is best summed up in the following phrase: Theological schools and institutions need to begin to think in terms of training the whole people of God, the laos, and as they do this, they need to think in terms of "in service education" rather than "distance education". The difference between "in service education" and "distance education" seems profound and obvious to me. It is a huge difference in attitude and practice that sees the center of learning as being the rural context, not the theological school or institutions. This means that the one who has to transport and translate itself is not the rural person but the educational institution.

Equip the Laity

The third change that is absolutely necessary for rural ministry has to do with how we approach the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Many times and for many different reasons, now and especially in the future, the rural church will not have an ordained minister leading it. New Zealand has met this reality head on by developing five streams of ordination, four of which address the laity. I would suggest in Canada we should go a different route. I can find no clear warrant in scripture for the practice of ordination to Word and Sacrament as we now practice it. I can find no place in scripture that even obliquely says that the one who is ordained to the office of minister is the sole celebrant when it comes to the sacraments. We need to appreciate that baptism is entry to the Table, and baptism is all that is necessary to be the celebrant with regards to the Table. It does not seem to be to be a big job to adequately equip faithful, baptized Christians to be able and good celebrants with regard to the sacraments. It is a much more biblical and more difficult job to adequately train overseers (episkope) as well as equip the laos to be preachers and teachers, and this is where most of the hard work needs to be done.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

The Source of Happiness (Paraphrase of Psalm 1)

Happiness can't be captured.
Like a wild bird or a bouncing ball,
it is always just beyond your grasp.
It is not found in fads or fashions, nor in climbing to the top of the heap.

Happiness comes from immersing yourself in God.
Instead of struggling to stay on top,
yield yourself to the deep flow of God's universe.
You will not drown.
You will be swept along by forces beyond your imagining.

(from Everyday Psalms by James Taylor)

Walking Wounded

A couple had been married for twelve years. They raised three children, built a home, and ran a business. "But", the wife wrote, "we didn't really know each other."

They were committed, but hadn't worked at the compatibility factor when tragedy struck. Ed, their "best man" and close friend didn't survive the open-heart surgery he had to face.

"Neither of us had ever handled pain of such magnitude. We were devastated by Ed's death."

"Bill, my husband went off by himself. I gathered my friends around me. They shared my shock and expressed compassion. But even with that, I was not comforted."

She tells of passing the bedroom door late one afternoon. Her husband was sitting slumped on the edge of the bed, a silhouette in the darkened room. He was totally alone.

What does one say? Each was locked in their aloneness until she heard him murmur. "We used to play in the dirt together in the alley behind the garage." She added, "He arranged our first date."

"Slowly, awkwardly, with tears streaming down our faces, we finally reached out. Neither of us knew the strength we had to give, but here we were willing to share with each other."

Each was vulnerable, and out of the darkness they shared their vulnerability. “On that evening”, she wrote, “we admitted we couldn’t handle life alone. We needed each other.”

The myth of merriment in our society often triggers deep feelings of vulnerability and we feel more isolated than ever.

Alone, we are the walking wounded. But when we share with a loved one or a spiritual mentor we find the wounds are not so deep and we are not alone.

“In the empty cave of grieving, in the desert of my dreams, in the tunnel of my sorrow, you are there, Lord, you are there.” (Hymn by Julie Howard)

(written by Joyce Sasse December '09)

When a Brother Dozes

An old man came to see one of the desert hermits and asked him this. “Tell us, when we see brothers dozing during the sacred office, should we pinch them so they’ll stay awake?”

The wise one replied: “Actually, if I saw a brother sleeping, I would put his head on my knees and let him rest.”

There is a dilemma. Do we live by the letter of the law, or by grace?

Whether we be public servant, health practitioner or ordinary citizen, others are quick to criticize, and they do that by holding up the letter of the law before us. Life is measured in terms of white and black, and the label is often attached for a long time. “Do you remember when he / she ...” is whispered with a certain aura of delight.

Then along comes someone who doesn’t listen to the rumours and isn’t so quick to quote the rules. That person can be a true peace-maker, and can quickly bring fresh understanding to the situation. These are the people who understand when a fellow-worshipper is tired, who stop to consider the broader picture of how it might be that this person acted in an unexpected way.

Isn’t this the message that Jesus brought to a society that was locked into rules of obedience?

You have to give thought to the circumstance, he said. If an ox falls in the well on the Sabbath, you have to pull him out while he is yet alive. If people are hungry, they need to be fed.

Who are you to judge another? What do you know of the whole story? The way my Father teaches us to live is with grace and mercy.

Reach out to your brother. Give support to your sister. Welcome the stranger. There is no greater love than this!

(written by Joyce Sasse November '09)

STORIES (Best Practices)

Small Community Faces Doctor Shortage

Solutions are being sought when the community loses the services of both doctors ...

Once they had a hospital – until the regional health authorities changed it to a first-aid site without consulting the residents. Those same authorities now want to remove all the small equipment (like blood pressure apparatus) while the community is struggling to make working conditions more favourable for resident doctors.

This community, my home town, serves an extended prairie region. Patients might otherwise have to travel up to 200 km to get to the nearest hospital.

With regret the two resident doctors resigned because of offers that would further each persons' professional careers.

If the community wants to find replacements, when the scarcity of such persons for rural communities is notorious, they realized they had to become pro-active. If the people of the region being served could purchase the clinic that would mean new doctors could come into the area without having to make this considerable out-lay of cash.

Under the leadership of the Mayor, and with the support of the Mayors from two adjacent towns, people gathered to see how they could help. A retired local doctor offered to come back on stream for six months. Locums, who did fill-in services, phoned to offer their services. An Emergency Medical Services (EMS) team will stay resident in the community for the present time. And those with political and administrative skills will develop an out-reach plan inviting new doctors to take up residence in the new community-owned clinic.

When a community works together under the guidance of committed leaders, great things can happen.

(Notes by Joyce Sasse, January / 10)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

IRCA (International Rural Church Association) International Conference

***Canada is looking for delegates to attend the
IRCA International Conference, September 20 – 27, in Germany.***

Theme: **“Hunger – the Global Challenge”**

Keynote speakers each day will cover the global challenge of hunger, migration and hope for the countryside – the churches’ response. A report from the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (agreed to at an Intergovernmental plenary session in Johannesburg in April 2008) will be a focus for some of the discussions.

Bible Studies with presenters from different regions of the world, a field trip, and reports from regions will be featured along with opportunities to converse with others at the conference. For details see www.irca.net.nz .

LINKS

An extensive listing of links to rural community and rural ministry sites can be found at www.circle-m.ca .