Communities that Refuse to Die
by Rev. Dr. Cam Harder

Recently I have been traveling across Canada talking to people doing research in rural communities. Let me share a couple of initial impressions.

First is that the struggles of rural communities are remarkably similar across the country. Many close to larger cities are being amalgamated. Their voices are lost in the noise of urban concerns, their identity and services leached by the city. Mining, lumber, fishing, cattle and crop communities are distressed by boom and bust cycles – mostly the latter right now. They are losing their livelihood to mountain pine beetles, cod-stock overfishing, BSE, drought and trade disputes. Tourist towns struggle with seasonal income. Non-residents buy up homes as summer cottages. This pushes property taxes and house prices higher than young families can afford. And most rural communities lament the loss of their youth in general. Rural kids have always left to go to school or see the world for a while. But now they are not coming back.

My second impression is that, in every region, a few communities swim against the tide. In March 2000 Tumbler Ridge, BC was faced with the closure of the Quintette coal mine that provided most of its income and employment. Almost 2/3 of its residents were forced to move. But the town refused to die. The remaining folks rallied, surveyed their assets and found that they had a wealth of resources besides coal. The greatest was their commitment to each other. Working together they did careful research, creative planning and marketing. They managed to rebuild their local economy on a more diverse foundation. And they regained as many people as they had lost.

Cap a l’Aigle, Quebec is another such town. It was losing its identity and its services through municipality amalgamations. One man noticed how many lovely lilacs there were in town. He talked a German horticulturist into donating a thousand different lilac varieties. Under his leadership the town imagined a new future. They created the Gardens of Cap a l’Aigle, an international lilac festival and a burgeoning tourist industry. They export thousands of lilacs around the world.

What makes such communities different? Not their financial capital, but the investments they have made in churches, in youth and aged services, in businesses and government, in health care, schools and clubs. They nourish their networks. And they do it when times are good so they can draw on them when times are bad.

Communities that fear the future get depressed, lose self-esteem. People turn inward, concerned with personal survival. But in that movement they turn away from each other, away from the relationships they need to build a new future together.
Every rural community has a wealth of hidden assets. It takes some research to uncover them. It takes courage and hope to share them. It takes people committed and open to each other to mobilize them. But it's being done by communities that refuse to die!

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