

The Rural Church: Dynamics of Decline and Resilience

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Thank you for welcoming me so well to Canada and to Lloydminster. I grew up in an unincorporated rural community so I know that 3rd Street was on the edge of town, that you can't walk for exercise because every car that passes wants to offer you a ride, if you dial a wrong number on the telephone you talk for 20 minutes anyway. If you get driven off the road by a combine five miles out of town, the word gets back before you do. Every sport is played on dirt. And, if you are a minister wanting to see an R rated movie, you better go to another town, not your own.

There are many characteristics of rural communities that make them similar, but there are many differences from one place to another that makes it a challenge to generalize.

The late Jane Jacobs (an adopted Canadian from the US) in her book: *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* identified five types of rural regions: abandoned regions, clearance regions, city regions, supply regions and transplant regions.

Abandoned regions: When the power of jobs reaches into a distant region disproportionately, it leads to the abandonment of once vital economic areas. The displacement of manufacturing jobs to Mexico, or Asia; of service jobs such as telemarketing to India...emigration of people to other areas has led to the depopulation of the countryside in Canada, the United States, Mexico and around the world. That's not to say that people no longer have emotional attachments to places just because those places are poor and lack economic activity. Sometimes it is the commitment of people to such places that allows some to make a commitment to the locales and their commitment, creativity and activity can be the source of un-slumming locales. Emigration is a bitter and painful choice.

City Regions: Just beyond the suburbs of cities are rural, industrial, commercial workplaces mingled and mixed together. They have rich, dense and intricate economies. City regions are defined not by natural boundaries but by having economic life interdependent with urban energies. City regions are the most dynamic of Jacobs' regional types because they involve inter-local exchanges between country and city leading to a lively economic interdependence. Among these are regional food systems and the commitment to a region by intentionally self-limiting businesses such as the Business Alliance for Living Local Economies and the Slow Money Movement.

Clearance Regions: Clearance regions result from technological change rather than the lure of other locations by the presence of jobs. New methods and new equipment clear people from the land and from their former livelihoods on it. Clearance regions are the mirror of abandoned regions. Those who remain stay badly off while those who leave for distant city jobs may improve their lot.

Supply Regions: supply regions are disproportionately shaped by the markets of distant settlements. They are narrowly specialized agricultural or natural (commodities for food or energy) resource goods for distant markets...from the United States and Canada to Mexico, Japan, India or Europe. More particularly, from Kansas' wheat fields, Montana's beef production, Iowa's corn fields to other locales around the globe. Increasingly these regions become highly specialized and thereby reduce the rural diversity that exists or has existed in their own rural regions. Iowa is a good example of this. The production for local consumption in agriculture and in food products has reduced significantly over the past 50 years. So the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture has research which demonstrates that Iowa has lost diversity to a significant degree, from 60 products to 7 major products. Supply regions are very common. They are sometimes referred to as "captive" or "colonial" economies. An economy producing poorly on its own behalf won't necessarily become well rounded and less economically dependent on its narrow specialties. When Fidel Castro threw out the capitalists, he didn't throw off Cuba's production of tobacco or sugar. Supply regions are warped by the power of distant local markets, but those distant markets are powerless to help them out. Only vigorous, innovative and productive local economic activity, with cities generating their own regional diversity in interdependent activity with their rural sectors instead of supply regions can help such regions transform themselves out of colonial servitude into local and regional more vibrant local and regional economies.

Transplant Regions: Transplant regions are rural areas where city enterprises have moved. When city enterprises transplant themselves into the rural areas they balance their needs to be close to their suppliers and customers against their conflicting aims of escaping the costs of city space and the congestion or other disadvantages of the city. The transplants cluster most thickly beyond the city and its suburbs, thinning out at a distance and petering out at the borders of the city. The freedom that allows an industry to move to a distant region without a city creates transplant economies that do not produce much for themselves as regions no matter how successful at attracting industries. Pigs, poultry, poker and prisons are among the current wave of transplant enterprises locating themselves in rural areas. When transplants leave one area for another, they leave behind only economic vacuums along with unemployment and depression. No web of symbiotic relationship remains as it does in city regions when industry transplants itself.

As you can see, the potential for innovation comes most easily to the city region, areas where there is a developed interdependence for rural and urban activity. Some of this depends upon a new in-migration of residents to rural areas, some of

it depends upon the intentional development by communities of their assets—natural capital and social capital in asset based community development.

Resilience research involving children, youth and families looks at the health-enhancing capacities, individual, family and community resources, and developmental pathways of vulnerable children and youth, who against all odds, manage not only to survive unhealthy environments, but thrive. The Resilience Research Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, supports both quantitative and qualitative research, with an emphasis on mixed methods designs that favor understanding resilience as a culturally and contextually embedded construct.

In recent years resilience research has been applied to communities who face a shock, economic, cultural and social. The shocking realization that one's community's welfare has been sacrificed to the dynamics of unfettered globalization, to the neoliberal policies of laissez faire economics, and to predatory policies that despoil the land and the people of the land.

HOW IS RESILIENCE LOST?

The resilience of social-ecological systems depends largely on underlying, slowly changing variables such as climate, land use, nutrient stocks, human values and policies. Resilience can be degraded by a large variety of factors including:

- loss of biodiversity
- toxic pollution
- inflexible, closed institutions
- perverse subsidies that encourage unsustainable use of resources
- a focus on production and increased efficiencies that leads to a loss of redundancy

HOW IS RESILIENCE ENHANCED?

Natural systems are inherently resilient but just as their capacity to cope with disturbance can be degraded, so can it be enhanced. The key to resilience in social-ecological systems is diversity. Biodiversity plays a crucial role by providing functional redundancy. For example, in a grassland ecosystem, several different species will commonly perform nitrogen fixation, but each species may respond differently to climatic events, thus ensuring that even though some species may be lost, the process of nitrogen fixation within the grassland ecosystem will continue. Similarly, when the management of a resource is shared by a diverse group of stakeholders (e.g., local resource users, research scientists, community members with traditional knowledge, government representatives, etc.), decision-making is better informed and more options exist for testing policies. Active adaptive management whereby management actions are designed as experiments encourages learning and novelty, thus increasing resilience in social-ecological systems.

On January 4, 2009 at the start of the new year two views of agriculture policy appeared in two leading US newspapers. The Chicago Tribune featured an article written by George McGovern and Marshall Matz. The New York Times had an op ed by Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson. Both articles identify the policies that need to be in place not for the next four years but for the next fifty years. Jackson and Berry say that a 50 year program is needed to “address forthrightly the problems of soil loss and degradation, toxic pollution, fossil-fuel dependency and the destruction of rural communities.” McGovern and Matz quote Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution, who “has concluded that the world will have to produce more food in the next 50 years than it has in the last 10,000.” Are they talking about dramatically different policies? Matz and McGovern could be described as productionist and Jackson and Berry, as holist. Placed side by side these articles articulate dramatically contradictory policies.

I was invited by the Pew Foundation to be a part of the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production in 2006. After two years of study and 1.8 million dollars of expenditure, the clear final position of the Pew Commission called for an ecological vision and for change from the dominant industrial policies. The Pew report, “Putting Meat on the Table,” was published in late April of 2008. At the same time the International Assessment of Agriculture Science and Technology in Development (IAASTD) was issued in Johannesburg, South Africa. IAASTD was a four year UN project by 400 participants funded for \$12 million by the World Bank. It included natural scientists, economists, farmers, social scientists, and the indigenous. The IAASTD report stated that “the way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse.” The conclusions of both studies were remarkably similar: the world can no longer conduct mono-crop and industrial practices as usual in agriculture policy.

The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) recently released a report, “Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa” (October 2008) indicating that organic, small-scale farming can deliver the increased yields which were thought to be the preserve of industrial farming, without the environmental and social damage caused by industrial agriculture. A similar report by the U.S. based Rodale Farm comes to the same conclusion in “The Organic Green Revolution.” The public is encouraging a new kind of policy. A new sense of unity and community including the biotic realm is in the process of stabilizing. Production-ism is on the decline. While we are in a period of transition, having seen the young leave, main streets collapsing, towns dying. At the same time it is possible to begin to reverse trends.

In Iowa, I developed an outreach program called DIRECTIONS. It resulted from a decision by to stake out a selected set of counties in Iowa and work at the community and county level to develop an approach to economic and social development which would help diversify the regional economy from exclusive

reliance on commodities and on CAFOs. From being a supply region to becoming more of a city region, moving from decline to growth through processes of diversification in social and agricultural activities. Iowa's economy is largely corn and soybeans, ham and eggs. It has mainly four main crops and along came a dramatic collapse in pork production incomes. This shock led me to search for ways of having the Church become an initiator of change. Churches can be facilitators and convenors. We started rural advocates with 40 other non-governmental organizations, community based enterprises and other churches to build a common legislative agenda for the state's legislator.

Iowa farmers and rural people are beginning to use entrepreneurial agriculture and various microenterprises to cope with changing economic situations, and are often using their local economy as a base to do so. The project DIRECTIONS focused on creating linkages and support for farmers and rural people at the local level to discover and build alternatives so that they can stay in their rural communities and prosper as the agricultural sector restructures, and the diversification of what had been primarily a commodity production and CAFO area. That the role that has been missing for this work to begin to truly "reinhabit" rural communities is the role of convenor and catalyst. This is a role the churches can play, I believe, more effectively than other social groups. There is a lot going on in rural Iowa, but it is not well connected as a combination of forces has broken many traditional linkages. Few professionals are left at the local level to do the work of assisting farmers and rural families and communities in discovering and building alternatives that will allow them to stay in their communities and prosper as organizations do not feel that they can engage in this intensive local work when funding tightens up and are pulling back to regional and agency level activities.

I saw the convenor/catalyst role as supporting local entrepreneurship as an important economic and community development strategy in rural counties in Iowa, fostering a broad range of collaboration for integrated support for farmers and rural microenterprises, and then using these collaborations to create local support and informational structures and networks to boost successful re-inhabiting. We began to use asset mapping as a way to re-build an experience of community among people who had become isolated from one another. We learned to go from depression to resilience.

Major activities and actions by NCRLC were focused on creating an integrated approach to building capacity to respond to the needs of farmers and rural people as they seek to discover and build alternatives so that they can stay in the community. Activities were undertaken a network of partners, both local and outside, and were focused with participatory methods to specifically help convene support and catalyze networks. Most activities were also concentrated in one geographic area as a way to create a deep web of supportive connections. Projects have included:

Growing Food and Profit (GFP) built local communities of practice to provide farmers and rural people with support and information as they create alternatives for their businesses. This effort has partners in the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture, an organization of farmers and “eaters” that focuses on local food and local food systems in Iowa, the local partners that are primarily local extension directors and local economic development personnel. Bringing these partners together with the idea of a “community of practice” has been a successful way to develop assets among local farmers and small businesses and to connect them with resources from agencies and organizations. The groups consist of all kinds of farmers—mid sized (300-500 acre) commodity farmers who are interested in diversifying; acreage owners growing small, high value crops for additional income; small farmers focusing on high value crops. They meet 4-5 times during the winter to share experience using a social learning format and hold 1-2 summer gatherings and field days often attended by others in the community.

Much positive energy is evident at the meetings of these groups. Ideas on topics selected by members are shared with each other as well as with outside resource people. Participants bring new ideas to discuss or products to show. Linkages are built among local people and between local people and outside resources.

“GFP is the best thing to happen to farmers in this county in years!” says one farmer and others nod agreement, “You can quote me on that!” “We were all closed up in our own little world,” another notes, holding her hands cupped together to illustrate “now it seems that we get so many new ideas to talk over and try, from new recipes at the potluck supper to new connections for our farm. We don’t want to let it get away!”

Graphing Community Linkages convenes and engages food system stakeholders in a local area in a conversation that describes and seeks to understand where assets are located and where value could be added to their local food system. The process centers around a process or system map and asks participants to describe both technical and social aspects of each category in their current local food system and then to look for resources, gaps, connections and think about possible action.

The most important thing about the process is the community conversation it creates. It is a form of public deliberation about what is going on in the community, beginning with food, convened in a conversation among community stakeholders that do not often come together. Some items in the descriptions are already evident, such as the lack of food processing infrastructure in rural counties. Some items provide concrete evidence that can (and have been) fed into local, state, and federal policy through policy work. Some items bring discoveries that can be put to use to generate new ideas for local people.

Women, Land, and Legacy (WLL) brings local women landowners and women farmers together in a dialogue that voices their connections to the land and their

visions for it, collects their concerns about their stewardship of the land and provides information on how they want to receive information and support. After the dialogue, a team of local partners, working with interested women, plans and carries out activities to build a support and information network for local agricultural women.

It has been identified that 42-47% of agricultural land in Iowa is now owned by women.. Research in Cass county in SW Iowa provided the basis for the State Outreach Council (SOC) of USDA to undertake a statewide outreach project with women. The decision was made by the project team to do this on a very local basis using a focused conversation/dialogue format rather than plan a statewide meeting or conference. Five counties in Iowa were chosen for local work, one in each corner of the state and one in the central area. NCRLC has provided the process design and facilitation for the project as a member of this team and has participated in all of the events. Local partners in each county include local NRCS and FSA staff, local extension, churches, businesses, and others interested in the issue. At least 300 local women landowners and farmer were involved in the first five conversations. Also involved were 20-30 local staff members from NRCS, FSA, RC&D, and extension as well as other community groups such as ministerial associations and churches, businesses and banks, and a community college.

The women attending the local events fall into 3 groups: older women, mostly widows who have inherited land; mid life women, most of whom see themselves not as “farmwives” but as full partners in a farming operation (whether they work off the farm or not); and women who are farming on their own—mostly small specialty farms. All groups have been present at all events. The women are very clear about what they want for their land--and this has been very, very consistent across the state: more conservation, more diversity, more attention to family and community, more neighbors on the land. We know that some of them need the economic return from their land, but profitability has not, to this point, been an important factor when they are asked what they want. And they respond dramatically to the opportunity to talk with other women about their land. “I hope we have good speakers today” commented one woman—she was reassured that they would “because YOU will be the speakers!”

The state team has begun to work with local teams to see that follow-up happens. Teleconferences have been scheduled with all local teams. Resources have been created for them to use in working with presenters to plan meetings that involve women. Local teams have stated that they would like to be connected to each other. Ten other counties spread over the state have already notified the SOC team that they want to plan an event and five have been selected for events in the coming year specifically to partner with the original counties in regional networks. Research on rural community development often points to the importance of connections with the leadership of women as a key factor in successful local work. WLL has certainly reinforced the importance of that idea. This study was reported on last year in the Wall Street Journal. Women want something more than to be land

renters. They want to be sustainable farmers and want sustainable practices on their land.

We are seeing evidence that when connections are made, things can begin to snowball. In the county where we began this work, a community market is beginning to form that will “reinhabit” the food system there. Local business women, one with an available building, the GFP farmer groups, food buying clubs of consumers, local and regional economic development and extension have come together to start the process. It will undoubtedly take some time to put it together, but already the guidelines are clear: more availability of healthy, fresh food; more of the food dollar spent here--going to local farmers and circulating in the local economy; and community based governance of the business.

We find that connecting the dots works. As we have expanded our web of connections, new ones are constantly popping up. Not only do these make resources more available to the local level, NCRLC can use the connections to get local information back to agencies and policy makers. Connections also really do encourage local innovation and new linkages that support the efforts of local people to reinhabit their place. Pioneers and experimenters in rural areas are often individually isolated from others in the community as “different.” But together, they form a community of practice that has the others watching, listening, and beginning to make connections. The isolation factor also holds true for women, who report feeling disconnected from information and support and obviously gain tremendous energy when they break this isolation with projects like WLL.

We need to spend even more time with local people. This is intensive work and it takes a lot of time to be quiet and listen first, to talk to people and to make connections. “Localness” of information and knowledge has not been valued and it takes time also to establish its value within rural communities and with outside linkages. We have learned that it is indeed the case that many local anchor and infrastructure people such as extension no longer feel that they have the mandate or time to do this work. That said, they are willing to help, but additional staff that can make connections and do groundwork with them-to convene and catalyze--is needed and welcomed. In addition, rural economic development professionals have known for quite a while that industrial recruiting does not work well for them—NCRLC believes that these connections can help them to see what alternatives might look like. We have learned, however, that while there is increasing recognition of the tremendous value of the intensive local work to create these alternatives—one size does not fit all. Participants emphasize that we must act locally, but every place is different—“what we need is a process and a tool box, not a single model or plan”.

We began formulating such a process. This project has also defined a set of principles that we can use as the work expands. These principles are:
Participatory assessment: communities need to know how to picture the whole nature of their place, including assets and linkages as well as needs and problems.

Community conversation: knowledge exists in people and gains meaning for them and for their community in conversation with others.

Focus on learning and value in work/practice: start with work or practice that people are passionate about and focus on continuous learning and building communities around it.

Web spinning: a web of connections to help information, ideas and inspiration to travel freely within the community will form a “knowledge ecosystem.”

More support and more training for long term sustainability is needed to establish these principles at the local level. These initial efforts by NCRLC at connection making and capacity building has accomplished a great deal but local capacity building is now needed to sustain the energy in the long run. These are new ways to work--people like them and want them to continue, but need to learn more about them. Steps to “reinhabit” rural communities should incorporate these project pieces into an infrastructure that supports and leverages what local people know better than anyone else—their local aspirations and work to obtain quality and stability in their lives in their place.

We can commit ourselves to go beyond CAFO and commodity production to community development as a focus for rural economic development, for agriculture and farm policy. This localization process is an alternative to global commodity and CAFO production as a primary economic focus for rural communities. It is a model that is transposable in large part, with due attention to the distinct differences of other cultures, places, regions and food economies. It is a practice which fits well into the sustainable development framework. It seems ideally framed to support efforts to support small farmers and their communities here and around the world. It should be part of an agenda at building a global network which prizes concepts like food sovereignty, community based development, new regional and local governance.

It is possible to envisage a global network of sustainable development efforts where localities, their landscapes and their communities are prized and not reduced to resource extraction opportunities for corporations. The movement from CAFO to community is significant for our day. It is incumbent for a sustainable future for this to become more than a movement but a stabilized and strategic component for the survival of the planet. It will require preserving the capacities of rural communities to build on their own assets, to be assisted in such by local associations of concerned citizens, administrative units at the local level, local governments, regional co-operation, partnerships between civil society, private businesses, government officials (should at least not hinder progress). Churches can play a vital role in this effort.

A new world is possible for people if we work on such endeavors as have a community focus to them. The church can be a primary resource for bringing rural communities from decline to resilience.

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