

## **Danish Folk School Movement**

Nicolaj Frederik Grundtvig (1783-1872) was a Danish clergyman who had some original ideas about Church, community and education. Note some of the following:

### **Church**

At the time, the Christian Church was shaken by controversy over the source of its truth: was revelation to be found primarily in the Bible, in reason, in personal experience, or in tradition? Grundtvig's answer was uniquely, but solidly grounded in his reading of the fathers of the early church. Christian faith, he said, is not grounded in "dead books", rules, or habits; nor in the vagaries of individual emotion or thought. Rather, the basis of Christian faith is to be found constantly renewed in the "living word" of song, speech and prayer, every time the Christian community gathers, and especially at baptism and communion. Christianity must be brought to life in the gathering of its people.

### **Community**

Grundtvig stressed the importance of community in secular life. He was deeply involved in the rural co-operative movement, and urged the Danish people to search for and build their character on a shared sense of their history. But he was no narrow nationalist: he argues that people with a sure sense of their shared past could more effectively build community among themselves and with the rest of the world.

### **Learning For Life**

Grundtvig is known as the father of the Folk School Movement: his leadership was born out of a deep conviction that education should be "for life", not against it; should be a living process, not dry academics or dull recitation; and should involve the whole person. In the schools he envisioned students and teachers would live together for periods of time, exploring together issues and ideas that mattered to their lives. In these schools, singing and celebration and the arts would have a central place. More technical or academic subjects would be approached in the spirit of life, instead of reducing life to technical formulae and qualifications.

Here are some pointers for rural community revitalization today that stem directly from Grundtvig's vision:

- ◆ It is easy to become discouraged about the lack of control that rural communities have over the forces that shape and sometimes dismember them. Grundtvig would encourage us to focus on the signs of life in a community, wherever they may be found, and always to foster that life.
- ◆ The best way to foster community life is to bring people together in ways that lend themselves to what might be called the "living word" – the voices of people speaking their life experience.

- ◆ Community life is fostered by regular occasions for celebration in which all members have a place, a role and a voice.
- ◆ We should focus more on sources of vitality in community organizing and less on identifying sources of authority. The cult of expertise needs to be replaced by an encouragement of and love for practical learning.
- ◆ Practical learning needs to be seen as learning which enables us, at any moment, to live a “plain and active, joyful life on earth” ... not as learning which merely equips us to compete against and put others down.

What we need above all is to re-learn ways of finding and communicating our deepest concerns, our relations to others, and the history of their development. Community is not so much formed by organizational charts as something told-into-being through our stories. For Grundtvig, and also for us, life and voice must go together.

*(Notes from Dr. William Ramp, Rural Sociologist, University of Lethbridge)*