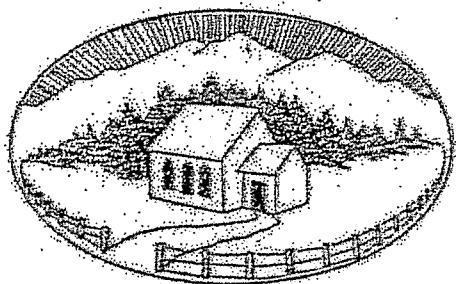


Rural Network News



No.14

March 2000

On the bookshelf of life,
God is a useful work of reference
always at hand but seldom consulted.

Dag Hammarskjöld 1905-1961

Rural Network News aims to share ideas for good rural ministry, create a sense of belonging to a unique group and encourage one another.

Please share this newsletter with others you think may be interested. Feel free to make photocopies.

Comments on any material are always welcome.

Country Conversations: Taking Shape

Things are shaping up well in Northland. We've had a few challenges to deal with, but most of them are on the side of over-enthusiasm. Local people are keen to do a 'show and tell' of some of the things that excite them. It's not quite so easy to motivate them to reflect on their problems and how these might be introduced and worked into conversations with the visitors. But the committee's motto is IWBAROTN* and it is really pleased at the excitement that is mounting for a down-to-earth kind of event.

Rural?

One of the interesting questions is what constitutes rural ministry in this kind of area. There are hardly any serious farmers in the participating churches so images of sheep-dipping and milking are much thinner on the ground than "Queen St" farmers and orchardists. There is also much evidence of the diversity developing in the rural sector these days, from oyster farming to tourism and export chilli to marijuana for local consumption. And Kerikeri has this you-beaut steam-powered sawmill

which is totally powered by the steam and electricity generated from its own waste wood; and a geothermal power generator that produces 35% of Northland's peak load and puts off-peak power back into the national grid and all waste steam and water back into the ground - totally automated. How the church relates to all these is not easy to see.

What they're saying

Especially at the local level where they're talking about quite basic matters:

At Russell: Of course we've got a ministry to tourism; we welcome them at church and show them our pew cushions. Well, don't laugh until you've checked out those particular pew cushions, but, yes, it's not exactly a very formal ministry to tourism. Their two programme conveners are both immersed in the industry and are members of their church's Local Shared Ministry team; they'll get it all together.

From Paihia: I can't offer you a billet but here's \$50 to help with expenses. Thanks very much, but you will come along for one or two sessions, won't you? These sessions on alternate ministry strategies are the most popular priority by far, but we still want locals along there to share in it.

From Kerikeri: We'll sing them our special welcome song. Yep, they have their own composer who can't read a note of music but has written two full-length religious musicals for their choir. But they'll also take some participants to the Marsden Cross for a study session in a woolshed. And wait until you experience their "flower devotions".

North Hokianga: How can we get them across on the car ferry and still have time to drive to the marae by 4pm? No trouble - everybody is going to be at Kawakawa by 1pm and we'll catch the 2.30 ferry no sweat. Well, not much sweat anyway; we may have to bribe the master to wait a bit for us. Moral: don't be late at Kawakawa! But if you are held up on the road, phone us on 025-298-1942.

South Hokianga: Do you realise how much country we are going to have to spread billets around on Thursday night? Yes, we do; big country, isn't it?

Kaikohe: Sir Paul Reeves can't now give us all of Friday 14th; should we shorten the programme or finish off without him? Oh, gosh, there's all those people wanting to get the evening bus to Auckland, too. They would have missed out on the dinner. Let's have a celebration luncheon at 2pm and just finish by 4pm and let them get away while we have a bit of a wind-down for those who are not going on straight away.

Business Day by Day

Meanwhile registrations trickle in rather more slowly than we'd expected, especially from New Zealand. There's plenty of room for latecomers at \$275 but we won't have much time to do the "extras" that we have promised others. We've been offered fees for a representative from South India. Six to ten emails a day

now. Beds and airport pickups are being organised in Auckland by Tony Bell's team at Avondale Union Parish. The after-conference trip through the Kauri Forest and Dargaville has been split so some can catch earlier planes out of Auckland on Sunday. Another three-day trip will take a quick look at Rotorua and back to Auckland. We're organising bedding for overseas visitors who aren't bringing their own. A pocket-size book of conference resources is coming together with some "rural" hymns, some produced specially for the conference. Copyright? Yes, we believe we're covered. A lot of people coming by bus; many of them would like to ride with people who could explain the route to them but we don't seem to have a single kiwi offer of a car ride.

Funding Assistance

Presbyterians and Methodists can both apply for grants towards their costs, based on their distance from the conference. (Everyone is a long way from Northland, actually). We understand that neither fund has been heavily leaned on so far and both have specific amounts to disburse. Other denominations are also arranging grants to assist with costs - talk to yours.

** It will be all right on the night* Dave Mullan

You can read about the conference on several websites, e.g. <http://users.netconnect.com.au/~billclrk/>
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Some Hopes and Expectations

Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conferences have had a high profile in Victoria. - Most of the (about) 10 of us who are coming across the water to the Northland consultation have been involved, one way or another, in one or more previous events. The process that is being offered for the 2000 consultation is a series of conversations. As conversations flow and deepen, depending on the dynamic between participants, the outcomes are, by intention, a bit of a mystery. All the better!

We're coming with open minds from a diversity of rural (and some non-rural) situations. We're looking forward to the energy and possibilities in sharing the realities of yours and our Christian communities as we seek directions and pathways for as many different futures as there are congregations and communities. We expect to find many common threads which we have individually woven in many different patterns. We also expect to find the stimulation that diversity and difference encourage. We will come to listen, share with you and together discern and learn some more about how God is among us as we seek to be faithful, creative and brave in challenging, even daunting, yet exciting times!

Helen van Riet, Victoria Rural Ministry Forum

In just over two weeks I'll be journeying to territory only a little further north than the schools I attended. But that was thirty years ago, and since then I have lived in Canterbury and Otago breathing a different landscape and social setting. I have learnt a different dialect, accent, words.

So can I reach through the differences to people and then reach out to find a way to bring this story home to Canterbury and let it shine on our lives? A light which will transform what we do, remind us of what we have achieved, challenge us to something new?

I hope to hear stories which will 'settle in me' and be able to spark off a retelling and reworking of the story here where I live and work.

I look forward to having nothing to do but listen, reflect, feel and grow for four whole days. And then to having a plane journey (pretty short actually) during which to let this gift of story, time, sight and people begin to steep its way into Halkett people, story, event and dream.

Joanna Warren, Halkett, Canterbury

My main purpose for going is the opportunity to meet with others engaged in ministry in a rural setting. And I was encouraged to register when I heard from one of the organisers of the Myrtleford Conference who wrote to ask if he could stay on his way to Northland.

I enjoy the North because of its laid back approach to life. It really is worthwhile going north of the Bombay Hills. Of course the region is steeped in history of our Christian Missionary work as well the European Settlement of Aotearoa/N.Z. so it is good to touch base with those roots. It will be good to touch base with people as they struggle at the rim of life. And to gather with people involved with the land and some of life's issues they wrestle with.

Robert Bruere, Hawkes Bay

Real friends are those who, when you feel you've made a fool of yourself, don't feel you've done a permanent job.

Spirituality and Economics

Early in the New Year, when there was a bit of lull in conversation, Brien McGarvey, host of the RFD+ email group, made the following comment:

I am convinced that we cannot talk about spirituality in this age without talking about work and finances. In almost every instance, especially during Bible studies, I find that most of the hopes described by my parishioners are tied much more to possessions desired and financial security for the future than for the delayed gratification that heaven offers.

What do you think? How does your Bible and your experience address faith in the context of a consumerist society?

Here are some of the comments that came in response:

While I would agree with you that most of our parishioners tend to lean toward the material and possession-able in their discussions, the question I would ask is whether we should be trying to steer them away from that?

Do you suppose Jesus' disciples talked about the boats, the donkeys, the house, the camels and other items of wealth with which they were familiar? If I wasn't a United Methodist, I would be willing to bet the farm that the disciples also talked about such material things. Do you think Jesus led those discussions? I tend to think Jesus concentrated on the 'really important' topics and I think there's a lesson in there for us, if we are called to be Jesus-like, which I believe we are.

If we sacrifice our future vision for the sake of the current vision, we lose our sense of all vision.

We cannot, nor should we, abandon the things of this world which affect the lives of those around us as well as ourselves. As Christians, we are called to be fully aware of what this world entails. But like Jesus, we live in a world of today which is heavily impacted by our understanding of the eschaton, tomorrow, and what that "future" entails. If we sacrifice or diminish our future vision for the sake of the current vision, we lose our sense of all vision.

I realise such a view doesn't fit with the intensive increase in individualism and hedonistic, "live-for-today" mindset that permeates our media, our advertising, our lifestyles.

But don't you think Jesus faced the same dilemma in ministering to his society? I'm sure the Romans and other dominant cultures of that day lived with the same mindset and philosophy: that living just for today was all-important.

Tim Reeves

A quote from a US documentary: "Acquisition has been pedalled as the greatest good. Information and values come from the television set rather than the pulpit. People socialise in the workplace, restaurants or night clubs rather than in the church." ("Two Thousands Years", Bravo Network, 26.12.99).

I live in the Buffalo Valley of Pennsylvania, classified by the state as rural, but slowly seeing our good farmland (among the best I have ever seen) fall to the bulldozers which work for the Yuppies who are moving here to escape New York, Philadelphia and the like. Our quality of public life is becoming increasingly more concerned with acquisitiveness, with the consumerism of the national culture, and less and less with the decency and tolerance that characterised it just ten years ago. So, I think I understand what you sense.

Yet, I must protest. To me, there is no need to speak with folks about "the delayed gratification that Heaven offers". I understand 'Heaven' to be that realm of the spiritual that exists simultaneously alongside that realm of the physical that people's eyes can see. The challenge is to learn to live in both realms, because there

is no greater joy than those times of participation in the Kingdom here and now.

resist/ignore the noise and anxiety of the culture

In worship, in prayer, in social action, I think we can participate in the Kingdom (of Heaven) right here, right now, rightly and truly. No one has to wait for anything. (As I re-read what I'm typing, it looks really corny, but I mean it all.) The problem is to resist/ignore the noise and the anxiety of the culture, to focus on the Love, and Abundance (as opposed to wealth), and Mystery which is life in (the Kingdom of) Heaven.

Joel Turrell

Is 'materiality' a word? It seems to me that Jesus, being a good Hebrew, was very materially oriented. However, I do not believe he is materially oriented in the same way that our society and culture is. Jesus and the Hebrew faith were, I think, very concerned about the necessities of life. How can we ensure and maintain life? A very tough question in those days. As I read the prophets and the Gospels, the material focus is on how WE ensure the material necessities of life for all God's people in a just way. That is in direct opposition to our society, where I believe the issue is, "I'm gonna get mine and hang onto it no matter what!" The spiritual concept of justice is rooted inherently in spiritual matters and is the crux of the whole debate in the Bible between the haves and the have-nots.

how WE ensure the material necessities of life for all God's people in a just way

I think we also need to keep in mind those among us who lived through the depression of the 1930s and need to hang onto what they have, because then, they had nothing.

Jerry Avise-Rouse

More from this conversation next newsletter...

RFD+ is a daily Rural Ministry Discussion list provided by CHASSIE and the Center for Rural Church Leadership and Sponsored by the Rural Church Network of the United States and Canada. You can now easily access RFD+, the Center for Rural Church Ministry and all the CHASSIE pages at: <http://ruralchurch.org>

Community Ministry: Rhana's Hope Story - New tricks for Old Dogs

When you come to a town at 19 on first teaching appointment, you don't give any thought to what you might be doing at 56.

But, you marry a local consultant, raise two children and become involved in the community life. The community sees you as the wife of a high profile guy, and expects you to fit the mould. I was hungry for something more in life, and eventually understood that it was a real relationship with God that was missing.

In the last 18 years my life has changed dramatically. I accepted Christ as my Lord and Saviour, and the more I learned and the closer I came to God, the more I wanted to know - and grow. Scripture and Sunday School teaching were well tolerated, but becoming a Lay Preacher raised some eyebrows. Some find my being a Candidate for Community Ministry difficult to accept.

Since attending the NSW Rural Ministry Conference in 1991, I have struggled with my call to ministry. I told myself that I was kidding myself, that I was stupid, that I didn't fit the mould. Anyway, God wouldn't expect me to leave my husband to go away and study for four years. What would be the point? Jim's work was permanently in Harden.

It was a frustrating time of tug-of-war, leaving me discontented in spirit. The process from Lay Preacher to "Sacraments Leader" took five years and was a steep learning curve for me. Study was not the problem. But putting it into practice was.

I have learned through the direction and leading of the Holy Spirit to love the local people in the four centres I work in. The compassion is genuine now, and the desire to support and help is beyond what I thought possible.

During another period of vacancy, the parish and presbytery explored potential ways forward and encouraged me to do more study. Eventually it was agreed I should candidate for Community Ministry. It took 20 months from my initial interview till I was formally recognised as a candidate in September 1999, though I have been the ministry leader of the parish for nearly four years.

I don't know who thought up the concept of Community Ministry, but I believe it is anointed by God. There IS a place for LOCAL people to be raised up to God's service. We have exceptionally good ecumenical relations in Harden. The encouragement I have received from the Anglican Rector and the Catholic Priest has been wonderful.

I love my ministry. I conduct worship in four congregations, two Aged Care Hostels, one Hospital and a Nursing Home. I visit these institutions and members in their homes. I lead two primary and two High School Scripture classes, all on a non-denominational basis. What opportunities!

I am studying now by distance education through Coolamon College. I can only do one subject at a time, but I hope, eventually, to complete my degree.

Community Ministry should never be seen by a congregation as a last resort. Community Ministry is just one of God's endless possibilities.

Rhana Wright
Rhana is the "Lay Pastoral Worker" serving the linked congregations of Binalong, Boorowa, Galong and Harden.
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Life is 10% of what happens to you, and 90% of how you respond to it.

Strategies for Visioning the Future: can we move beyond the pain of rural decline?

A Conversation across the Pacific

This began as a paper by Joyce Sasse, Program Developer of the Canadian Prairie Forum on Church and Community. On-line chat on Agriville.com produced the current version.

Rural Decline is a Painful Experience

Watching life slowly seep out of your community is akin to sitting helplessly at the bedside when there is nothing more you can do for a dying loved one.

I have never sensed such a widespread degree of despair on the Prairies, nor seen rural people with such a lost sense of self-esteem. The economic and social and political forces are absolutely overwhelming!

Strategies for Visioning the Future

From of old the wise ones have warned that "without a vision, the people perish." We need strategies for visioning the future.

- Start by coming together to *share stories and talk about our pain*: name the symptoms and try to diagnose what the basic problems are that need attention; find a focus or a framework for this talk so as to not wallow around in dis-ease.
- Recognise those individuals who exhibit skills that identify them as potential leaders. Encourage these individuals to practise their skills, and support them in their endeavours so they can get on with facilitating the work at hand.
- *Name the demons* that are causing the havoc. Who are they? How do they gain power? How do they maintain power? What is the extent of their influence? Do they have an Achilles Heel?

Talk also about who else is getting ground down by these same tyrants: are the evil forces powerful enough that alliances that might otherwise seem to be unlikely need to be forged in order to stand against these forces?

- Find ways to *acknowledge the grief* that has been experienced by those caught in the grip of rural decline. Unless a wound is tended, it will always fester. But if the grief work is done properly, people slowly begin to trust that they do have a power within themselves to do what needs to be done.

Part of the grief work includes honouring and commemorating the people, places and traditions that have been significant in the life of the community. Giving value to life is a most powerful way to counter those forces that would reduce us to being mere economic or political units.

- Above all, invite people to *rename those spiritual values* they hold dear.

Start with the work ethic. In the past, rural people have felt pleasure in working toward meaningful and useful ends. This ethic has enabled them to fight through the verities of weather, outride the surges in the markets and withstand many of the foibles of government. But today,

in spite of putting heart and soul into their work, many of the noblest of efforts seem to be to no avail. This is cause for despair.

It is normal for people who live in close community to experience the pain of others within the community. But the pain of feeling helpless in the face of overwhelming odds is oft times unbearable. Pain of debt, in particular, is different because those bearing the pain often feel shame, and are sure they will be shunned by others who do not understand the situation.

Story-telling, the chief means by which we communicate, reflects another significant spiritual value. In telling the story, both speaker and listener are often engaged in a process that helps them make sense of what is happening in their lives. A clergy friend wrote about a tragic death: "the most important way that people could talk about their grief was to tell stories about (their friend's) wild and wacky ways." She goes on to say "in terms of the church's role in all that, the most effective thing I could do was simply be around, listen to the stories, honour them by not being too shocked, and give some language of faith to those stories during the funeral service."

All of this is done within the context of community. The rural life-style offers a valuable and unique sense of community in which the individual is both avidly independent and strongly interdependent.

Rural identity flows both from belonging to community and finding one's identity with the land. So, when the land suffers from extremities of weather, for example, people of the land feel that pain. They are rooted in this medium of culture and are nurtured by it....

Each of the above, plus a strong appreciation for the abiding presence of God, gives us a framework for understanding the spiritual values of rural people. When rural people are grounded in these values, they seem able to draw on a source of strength that is deep enough to help them face the most chaotic of situations. When they lose touch with these moorings, adversity often becomes overwhelming.

When individuals understand and appreciate the values that nurture them, they are then freed to reach out and grow in new and exciting ways.

Role of the Church

The rural church is very often one of the last institutions to remain in rural communities. Local church leaders and clergy realise how rapidly their resources also are being depleted. If they persist in carrying on in the way to which they have become accustomed, they too will probably close, leaving people with even more feelings of abandonment.

I believe the church has a primary role in the rural community, and is especially important in the way it can serve in a declining community. But it does need to redefine its approach to more closely follow the style of a *chaplaincy* - which means being less dependent on

institutional trappings, and more flexible in working with the people where they are.

When I talk about "chaplaincy", the image of Father Mulcahy of M.A.S.H. 4077 comes to mind. The good Father was a spiritual mentor and a caring pastor to those who lived in the midst of chaos. Because he spent time working alongside the medics and support personnel, they trusted him and confided in him. He encouraged them to be there for each other, and he supported their wild efforts to vent emotions and boost morale.

Mulcahy also fulfilled his priestly function - giving leadership in worship, sacraments and counselling. But it is clearly evident he focused more on the spiritual health of the people, and less on institutional survival.

By insisting their clergy understand the cultural and spiritual values of rural people, local church leaders can call forth this kind of ministry. This focus would provide an encouraging model for how other institutions serving small communities could refocus themselves.

In the church community, work could start to help rural folk, farm and non-farm, understand they share many things in common, from a rural cultural point of view. People could also be encouraged to see where the different understandings brought in by individuals choosing to move into the community could enhance and strengthen the whole.

The church is also a natural place to start naming demons and finding allies. Often, through the broader network of the church, resources are readily available that will help with identifying the forces that operate in the global arena.

Grief work, commemorating and honouring people and places starts naturally within the context of the church. But it must intentionally reach out beyond the local membership and beyond the Sunday morning gathering.

One tradition of small churches is to invite inexperienced persons to help with activities, and eventually lead them through an apprenticeship in how to be a leader. As one's leadership skills grow, individuals can then be encouraged to offer to help in the broader community.

Where clergy appreciate those spiritual values that are especially meaningful to rural people, they find that people are hungry to seek out spiritual nurture and discernment. Biblical traditions are seen to have fresh relevancy. Recognition of ageless truths, and ownership of these values brings new vitality to people anxious to address their current situation. A community that once was content to accept the status quo, dares to dream dreams and expect change.

Where the church follows this strategy, it can help members of declining communities discover unrecognised potential, and carry on with dignity and a sense of purpose in the place where they find themselves.

Glimmers of Hope

Fuss 2000. One small community celebrates its "Calendar of Characters". They have a Bulletin Board set up in a prominent location on which they name one or two different people from the community each week, and point out how each is able to contribute as a unique character within the community.

"Paint Is Good" "Paint is good" is the mantra of Monica Coney of Gravelbough, Sask. She hints that small towns and empty buildings need not be eyesores. And when they are spruced up, everyone feels better. Another favourite saying: "If you do anything to improve the situation, more is possible".

What Do Elders from Native Culture and Seniors from Rural Culture Have to Share? At a cross-cultural Conference native and rural elders talked about what each is doing to help their own culture survive. Key questions: What are the threats to our culture and its survival? Does it help when people understand their spiritual values? Is there a role for Seniors in each of our cultures? How do we pass on our history and culture and faith to the younger generations?

Trans-Tasman Conferences. After these conferences organisers noticed the following: "Participants at the first gathering had low energy levels and were uncertain and bewildered. As they listened to stories and shared experiences, a strong momentum developed, and the conference finished on a positive note of hope. At succeeding gatherings the resilience of local congregations and local communities was evident. Local solutions were being worked out."

Agriculture's Association with Government

"Simply put, we now have no subsidies", a New Zealand participant in the on-line chat commented.

"An enormous lot of work has gone on in further processing as well as marketing. We want government support in things like

1. overseas trade: keeping the balance of freedom to trade and protection from being exploited
2. market development: networking using government contacts, embassies, linking different industries and making it a joint effort
3. scientific research which needs an ongoing, longer term perspective than the market alone offers
4. information sharing
5. crisis help (income support) in times of adverse weather conditions

"There currently some discussion about directing support not so much to individuals (as with subsidies to individual farmers) but towards the economic and social viability and independence of communities (community building and rebuilding)."

Another New Zealand comment: "We need the right amount of government - not too much and not too little. Remember, Government is us doing things for each other."

Joyce Sasse, Pincher Creek, AB, Canada

Following the path of least resistance is what makes rivers and humans crooked.

Hawkes Bay Rural Ministry Happenings

The interdenominational group based in the Hawkes Bay continues to meet on a regular two monthly basis. Among other things last year they heard an excellent talk on Genetic Engineering by Professor Hugh Blair from Massey University.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment has been in the area working with a local group to consider the biological controls being mooted for possum control, some of these involving genetic modification. Robert Bruere attended the "Focus Group" based at Massey University and we hope to have some reflections from him in the future.

The next meeting of the Rural Ministry group is on March 14, with the Revd Elizabeth Jordan as speaker. Elizabeth is from Lichfield Diocese in England with responsibility for the oversight of small rural parishes. She is currently on Study Leave exchange with Bill Bennett, Ministry Enabler for the Waiapu Diocese.

Enquiries about this meeting or the Hawkes Bay Rural Ministry Group, contact John Davies, (06) 8558 115.

THE SWAGMAN AT THE GOLDEN GATE

Saint Peter put his quart-pot down and rubbed his saintly eyes,
As through the clouds came a figure bowed pursued by swarms of
flies;

Came tramping up to heaven's gate and stood there in amaze.
He dropped his swag and tuckerbag and said "Well, spare me days!"

"I've humped this old Matilda since the age of seventeen.
There's not a track in the great outback that we two haven't seen.
So when I rolled me final swag I thought I'd cleaned the slate -
But stone the crows! Before me nose, I see another gate!"

"In 50 years of tramping and covering all the while
Twelve miles a day, at least to say, with two gates to the mile
I'm not much good at figures, but the way I calculate
In my career I've opened near on fifty thousand gates.

"There was gates that fairly haunt me, there was gates of every sort,
Sagging gates and dragging gates, high, low, long and short.
Gates that seemed to challenge you and gates that seemed to grin -
Lazy gates and crazy gates that hung by half a hinge.

"Gates tied up with fencing wire and gates with fancy scrolls,
With patent catch and homemade latch, and gates made out of
poles.

Wide gates and narrow gates, big barriers and small,
Rusted gates and busted gates - I've wrestled with them all.

"Now I've opened them and shut 'em till the sight of all I hate,
And I'd sooner miss yer Heavenly Bliss than open that there gate!
What's that? You say you'll open it! Well, that's what I call nice!
And close it, too, when I've got through? This MUST be Paradise."

Anon

Ecotheology

Ecology and Theology - how are they connected?

A Conference on this important theme is to be held 3—7 July 2000 at Bishop Julius Hall, Christchurch. "The conference aims to clarify the relationship between theology and ecology and propose outcomes for just and environmentally sound teaching and practice in faith communities" said Dr Keith Carley.

There will be public lectures on ecotheology by internationally recognised keynote speakers, including Dr Ruth Page author of *God & the Web of Creation* (London, SCM, 1996).

There will also be the launch of the first two volumes of *Earth Bible* edited by Norman Habel and published by Sheffield Academic Press. Volume One: *Approaches and Principles*; Volume Two: *Ecojustice Readings in Genesis*.

The conference aims to be multi-cultural and ecumenical, to bring together a range of individuals and groups with interest in ecology and theology to help guide our faith communities and all communities desiring to improve the quality of life for future generations.

There will also be the opportunity for those who wish to present papers on ecotheology or other topics. Expressions of interest in presenting papers or running workshops at the conference are invited.

Accommodation will be available in Bishop Julius Hall: a hall of residence for the University of Canterbury.

The Conference is the Joint Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Associations of Theological Schools and the Australian and New Zealand Society of Theological Studies. Further details are available from

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Check the website: <http://www.nzats.godzone.net.nz>

Lead your life so you won't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.

Honour and Shame on the Land

Christopher Lind serves as President of St. Andrew's Theological College, Saskatoon and each month produces a column on the "moral economy". This is the 38th in the series. It begins with a story very familiar to NZ in the 1980's and it is tragic to see this has been repeated in Canada. The reflection on honour and shame that follows is insightful and very relevant to ongoing issues of land ownership and succession.

In the late seventies Bob and Helene bought a homestead and a quarter section of land close to the farm where Helene grew up. A large garden along with

some chickens and cattle supplied the family's food needs.

They shared labour and (older) equipment with Helene's father. The operation did not make much money but it was generally in the black.

In the mid eighties Bob and Helene noticed that their water supply was declining so they went to an agricultural lending agency run by the Provincial Government. They asked to borrow \$10,000 to put in a new well. According to Bob and Helene, the lender replied, "We don't make loans that small. Besides, your operation needs to grow if it's going to survive. You need to get large enough to gain some efficiencies. If you want the money, you'll have to borrow at least \$60,000."

Why not buy the 80 acres that's just gone up for sale next door?"

Bob asked, "What am I going to do with the extra \$50,000 that would provide enough income to cover the payments?" "Buy 80 head of sheep", the lender replied. "Where would I put them?" questioned Bob. "Why not buy the 80 acres that's just gone up for sale next door?" said the lender.

Bob reluctantly took the lender's advice and bought both the sheep and the land. Soon after, the market price for both mutton and wool began to plummet. In addition, the market value of land also began to fall precipitously. The land no longer offered sufficient security for the loan so the lending agency required Bob and Helene to either pay off the loan or put the other quarter section up for collateral. Since they couldn't pay off the loan, they agreed to the lenders demand. In the end, they lost everything except the house and the barn and are no longer farming.

But why should they feel ashamed when it's not their fault?

For people familiar with the Canadian farm scene, this is a depressingly familiar story. The fact that Bob and Helene are not their real names is also a common pattern. Only by fictionalising the identity of the storytellers can we dare to break the silence and tell the truth. Why is that? Because farmers have been made to feel ashamed of their predicament. But why should they feel ashamed when it's not their fault, you ask? Good question! Furthermore, it's a good question addressed by a colleague of mine.

Dr. Cameron Harder is a Professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. He recently completed a study entitled "The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy" from which the story of Bob and Helene is taken. Dr. Harder's thesis is that the silence in distressed rural communities is a function of an ancient honour/shame system which continues to have power there. He argues that this honour/shame system is

unhelpful and inappropriate because farmers lack the kind of systemic control necessary for them to take responsibility for the crisis.

this honour/shame system is inappropriate because farmers lack the systemic control necessary to take responsibility

The sense that one ought to be in control of one's operation, Harder writes, leads to shame when financial problems develop.... The problem is not only that farmers withdraw from community; many in the community also avoid, even shun, the farmer. As an example, he describes a radio journalist who told the story of one family's financial difficulties. Some months later she discovered that when the report had aired, the family found themselves shunned by their neighbours, excluded from community events.

Shame is the shadow side of honour and the opposite of guilt. A person feels guilty about having committed a wrong act but their sense of self remains intact. When a person feels shame it is their whole self which has been shamed and this shame has a public dimension. It is a community which bestows honour. An individual cannot honour themselves. So too it is a community which withdraws honour and instils a sense of shame.

Harder puts it this way: *Shame and embarrassment have to do with a negative evaluation of one's (socially constructed) self. Guilt, on the other hand, is a negative evaluation of one's behaviour. Guilt is the easier to handle because it does not touch the core of one's life as deeply. Often, therefore, guilt is used to deflect shame.*

shaming ... is essentially a form of scapegoating in which the failings of the many are absolved by laying blame on a few, allowing the broad-based problems to continue unchallenged

Harder's analysis patiently recounts all the mistakes lenders made in the middle of the farm crisis. He recounts the many errors in policy judgement made by governments which led to the same result. The international market dynamics do not escape him nor does the greed of those farmers who want to get bigger at the expense of their floundering neighbours. However, when all is tallied, he discerns a sector of society which has wrongly internalised the blame of others. *It reveals shaming in this case to be not a healthy community discipline. It is essentially a form of scapegoating in which the failings of the many are absolved by laying blame on a few, allowing those broad-based problems to continue unchallenged.*

I welcome constructive feedback. You can write to me care of this newspaper, or email me at Lind@sask.usask.ca. Receipt of correspondence implies permission to publish.

Christopher Lind, Saskatoon, Canada

Have you wondered...

what it would be like if God decided to install voice mail? Imagine praying and hearing this:

"Thank you for calling God's House. Please select one of the following options: Press 1 for Requests, Press 2 for Thanksgiving, Press 3 for Complaints, Press 4 for All Other Inquiries."

What if God used the familiar excuse, "I'm sorry, all of our angels are busy helping other sinners right now. However, your prayer is important to us and will be answered in the order it was received, so please stay on your knees."

Can you imagine getting these responses as you call God in Prayer?

"If you would like to speak to: Gabriel, Press 1; Michael, Press 2; For a directory of other angels, Press 3. If you'd like to hear King David sing a psalm while you are holding, please press 4. To find out if a loved one has been assigned to Heaven, Press 5, enter his or her social security number, then press the pound key. If you get a negative response, try area code 666.

"For reservations at God's House please enter J-O-H-N, followed by 3-1-6. For answers to nagging questions about dinosaurs, the age of the earth and where Noah's Ark is, please wait until you arrive here.

"Our computers show that you have already prayed once today. Please hang up and try again tomorrow so others may have a chance to get through.

"The office at God's House is closed from 5 p.m. on Friday, all day Saturday and Sunday. Please pray again Monday after 9:30 a.m. If you need emergency assistance contact your local pastor."

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Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.



May God the Creator go on creating within us,
God in Jesus Christ sit at table in our midst
And the Spirit lead us in the dance of life.

From *The Glory of Blood, Sweat and Tears*,
by Dorothy McRae-McMahon, JBCE, 1996.

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