

A Christian Perspective on Sustainability in Rural Areas

Rural writer Wendall Berry has said:

If you take seriously those passages from scripture that say that we live by God's Spirit and his breath, that we live, move, and have our being in God, the implications for the present economy are just devastating. Those passages call for an entirely generous and careful economic life.¹

So what of a Christian perspective on sustainability in rural areas.

Over the last fifty years rural areas have experienced the hard realities of unsustainability. Since WW2 New Zealand has seen rural population decline as machinery, rye grass and clover, fertiliser and off-farm agricultural education have brought changes. Then came the 1980's. It was called Rogernomics in New Zealand – going cold turkey on government subsidies and trade protection. We learnt to live with what I call the unholy trinity of markets, government and the weather. We lamented as government agencies, banks and other service providers moved out and rural schools closed. Those of us left wondered how long we would last. When the bottom line is financial, either it's prove you're viable or else close the church/sell up the farm. Community sustainability has taken second place to financial viability.

By the end of the century environmental unsustainability was high profile. The urban majority in our countries made sure of that but we knew it ourselves first hand. We had our own concerns about animal welfare, soil health and clean waterways, the big issue being water itself. "It's hard to be green when you're in the red." Doesn't that sum up the dilemma: the pain, the shame and the powerlessness of it?

For John Ikerd, retired USA agricultural economist and keynote speaker at the International Rural Church Association conference in Canada two months ago, the problem is the assumption that the only bottom line is financial. He says bluntly:

The industrial practices of corporate contract agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes, and turn thinking, caring farmers into tractor drivers and hog house janitors.²

Outside investment to address local needs is damaging rural communities around the world. "Under the guise of rural economic development," says Ikerd, "rural areas around the world are being 'colonized'."³ This is colonisation, not by other cultures or societies, but by those whose sole rule and culture is neo-classical economics. Multi-national corporations are the empire builders of today.

When we think about who or what contributes to our own feelings of powerlessness on the farm and in the community, it is not difficult to identify the colonising forces. Who has a say in commodity prices? Who decides what seeds, fertilizers and other agri-inputs are available to us? Who holds the lion's share of the equity on our farms nowadays? And how come some rural areas have much better infrastructure and a quicker response to climate crises than other areas? My home is in a district where land prices continue to escalate beyond the reach of average New Zealanders, let alone orchardists and farmers. We are being colonised by the world's wealthy for the warm climate and the beautiful view. It may feel positive and promising to be surrounded by constant construction and as a parish to be securing our finances by developing our property wisely, but who is going to feed the future city of the Bay of Islands? In addition the other half of my parish is classed as an economically depressed district and has a significant Maori population. It has been devastated by two above-all-previous-level floods this year – in March and in July. If Kerikeri

¹ Wendall Berry, Interview with Rose Marie Berger, *Sojourners*, July 2004

² John Ikerd, "The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities", *Cry from the Heart* IRCA Conference, July 2007, p.21

³ *ibid.*, p.19

where I live has needed work done, the wealth of its community, and the interest of the Prime Minister in its heritage values, have seen decisions made and action taken. If Kao needs work done in order to survive, who is going to pay? It wasn't done earlier because the community couldn't afford the required third through localised rates.

The Christianity that was around when I was growing up would have struggled to have a perspective on this. These issues were, as ecotheologian Mary Grey puts it, "regarded as peripheral to the *authentic* project of salvation."⁴ In our predominantly white churches, overseen from urban centres, there was little theological reflection on earth issues, and social rejection of the earthy. Too heavenly minded to be any earthly good, as the saying goes. However the practical Christianity I personally grew up with seems to have sidestepped a lot of that. What was Christian was how you farmed and how you lived in the community. To be rural was to know your neighbours and know that you need them and they need you. Discussing the weather was never simply small talk: it was essential to picking up others' needs and concerns.

Sustainability is profoundly Christian and inherently biblical.

You'll be familiar with the instructions in Genesis 2, that *adam*, the creature made from the topsoil, *adamah*, is to serve and guard the land, usually translated "till and keep", but the Hebrew words clearly point to being a servant of the soil and a protector of its animals.

Genesis 4 shows what can happen when this focus is put aside: Cain murders his brother Abel. Sustainable life needs to cope with variable results. In some seasons crop farmers have a lousy year and stock farmers, for a change they might say, get good prices. So don't get hung up on one year's results, or let finances rule your response so much that family and community relationships are harmed. The land is also affected: the earth cries out for the blood of Abel and the consequences for Cain are that he has to become an urban dweller. He is the archetypal ancestor of city life, in which crafts and technology are fostered along with other specialist pursuits including science and the arts. But urbanisation raises the question: where will they get their food? The biblical witness is to increasing extraction from the land and exploitation of its people. The story is saying that relationships with community and with land cannot be neglected if life is to be sustainable.

The tower of Babel⁵ is another lesson in sustainability. The urban empire has grown too big: a single culture pursues progress at all costs and builds as its symbolic centre of reference a giant inanimate structure. What does God do? Scatters them, so that they can regain the dynamic nature of life, proliferating as diverse centres of language and culture. Sustainable communities are not standardised clones of empire but multiple and varied and always in process. They must work out their life in the local context, in the particular environment on which they know they depend, if they are wise.

If they are not wise, prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Hosea make it clear what happens. Their message is: when you weigh small and charge heavy, buy the needy for a pair of sandals, and consider spiritual practices a waste of time⁶, the social fabric is unravelled and the land gets degraded. As Hosea puts it comprehensively:

The Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land,
 there is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
 and no knowledge of God in the land.
 Swearing, lying and murder,
 and stealing and adultery break out;
 bloodshed follows bloodshed,
 Therefore the land mourns,

⁴ Mary Grey, Editorial in *Ecotheology* 4 (January 1998), p.5

⁵ Genesis 11

⁶ Amos 8:5-6

and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.⁷

There are echoes in this of the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, but here it is uncreation. What is lacking are the fundamental virtues of *hesed*, *emeth* and *da'ath elohim* – loving loyally, being true and deep spiritual awareness. Sustainable living according to the prophets, aka living God's way, involves an economic system and habits which keep society and land in the picture at all times and which seek the balance that these virtues generate.

Jesus of Nazareth continues this theme of integrity as he subverts the corporates of his time. His beatitudes imply that those who are succeeding according to the empire driven economy are not in fact blessed, but are more at risk of being off-track with the fundamentals of right relationship and life for the long haul.⁸ He tells a story of a man with such a bumper harvest his barns aren't big enough.⁹ He solves his problem – works it out on his own, so uncharacteristic for community-loving Middle Easterners – by pulling them down and building bigger ones. Time goes by and he has so much wealth stored up he doesn't need to work. He plans to celebrate – on his own, as it seems he has no family, no community to party with. But then he dies, the life on loan taken back.

What's unsustainable about this life is his holding as his own what the land gives to him. Gifts are for handing on, but the line he draws around himself closes him off from other people. Luke's gospel follows this story with the classic "Therefore do not worry about your life... Has anyone by worry added to the span of their life? ... Consider the lilies, how they grow..."¹⁰ Perhaps that should be compulsory reading alongside every session spent on the farm accounts. Keep heart and head working together.

Ikerd sees sustainability as a move from a conventional decision hierarchy, which considers social and environmental issues only after financial criteria have been met, to a systemic one, in which "the economy is a subsystem of society, which in turn is a subsystem of the natural ecosystem."¹¹ Imagine if we could say: how can you be red when you're in the green? We start with the big picture with its principles which Ikerd names as holism, diversity and interdependence, move through to the community context with principles of trust, caring and courage, and to the needs of the household – i.e. economics – with its principles of value, productivity and sovereignty.

A juggling act or, better said, an integrating act. These principles all count because sound economics, community well-being and healthy soil, air and water are all vital when we look broadly enough and into the future. For a key point in the philosophy and theology of sustainability is that our horizon of concern includes future generations. Economics on its own cannot factor them in: only when we look at community health and environmental well-being do we start looking wide and far enough to dare to use the word 'sustainable'.

For Jesus' *pièce de resistance* for sustainability has to be his answer to the question 'who is my neighbour?'

Roman Juriga, the second keynote speaker at the IRCA conference, is an Orthodox Christian in the Czech Republic working on the theology of renewable energy use and energy saving. About the neighbour question Juriga says: "The answer of our Saviour is surprising. Our Lord says (although we do not always like it) that our neighbour is really every human being..."¹² Juriga's Orthodox faith means it is vital for him that Christ is at the heart of his Ecotheology. Australian Barry Lead

⁷ Hosea 4:1-3 (NRSV)

⁸ Matthew 5:3-12

⁹ Luke 12:13-21

¹⁰ Luke 12:22ff.

¹¹ John Ikerd, *A Return to Common Sense*, Philadelphia: 2007, p.127

¹² Roman Juriga, "Saving God's Creation by Saving of Energy and Renewable Energy Utilisation: Contemporary Energy Challenges for Rural Communities", IRCA Part 2, 1-9

notes that we can learn from Orthodox churches, commenting that their church architecture, with its prominent figure of Christ Pantocrator, “vigorously proclaims the supreme Lordship of Christ over all creation.”¹³ It is the gospel of the Lord of all that drives Juriga’s concern for relationships between people and nations and between people and environment: “our salvation is not possible without our care for our neighbour and our interest in the life they live and will live.” Indeed the interconnectedness of all of God’s creation makes all creation our neighbours, which means, says Juriga, “that the creation expects from us exactly the same [love and mercy] we expect from God.”¹⁴ Now he urges us as rural communities to lead the way by making our own decisions on energy use and renewable energy production and putting sustainability into practice locally. That is, this biblical Christian picture is a practical model for decision-making.

As rural people who claim faith in Jesus Christ, how then do we get sucked into sidelining the Christian way and its insights for sustainability? What prevents us from holding together the needs of soil, people and economics? In other words, why is this an issue for us?

There are persistent factors, call them ‘part of life’ factors, that I believe make it difficult for us. First I see value in naming our sheer busyness as a factor that holds us back from sustainable wisdom. As I’ve said elsewhere “it is our extreme busyness that creates a feeling of being overwhelmed by tasks and responsibilities and entrenches a preoccupation with our own needs and commitments.”¹⁵ Part of this is the relational nature of farming, with the needs of land and stock, and the weather, generating major demands on our resources. There are family needs too, and our commitment to the community. But in large part the driver of our rural busyness is the western economic culture we operate in. Ikerd speaks of the power of the corporations to hold us to their neo-classical economic rules. He says that “rural people everywhere... must reject the false promises of industrial economic development.”¹⁶ Farmers operate under market pressure to pursue, as consumers, an ever higher standard of living and, bombarded in the media by financial analysis and advertising messages, programmed to believe that there is no alternative but to put self-interest first. But we also “operate as producers beholden to market needs and international finances. If there is any pause to the endeavours to produce and make a profit the future threatens failure and inadequate income. Others will get there first and reduce the space in the market and the supply of scarce money and goods.”¹⁷

Which brings us to the second factor that gets in the way: fear. We fear that we will fail in the competition for livelihood. Isn’t that the essence of the Cain and Abel story, that there was approval for only one sacrifice, namely Abel’s? Didn’t it happen again with Esau and Jacob: apparently blessings are a scarce resource so there could be only one. These stories raise questions that I think readers are expected to ask, if they are looking for God’s word in the Bible that is. In the face of centuries of theologians presuming that Cain must have done something wrong, we have to acknowledge that the biblical text doesn’t actually say this. For me, a more true to experience interpretation is that it was a bad harvest for Cain the crop farmer, but okay enough a season that Abel was able to select out at least one prime lamb for the sacrifice. (Imagine if there had been a dairy farmer brother as well.) As Forest Gump said: it happens. Indeed the main focus of the story is how to deal with the let down: not to lash out, not to take it out on people and environment around him, but to be wise. Be your brother’s, or sister’s, keeper. Learn from experience. Keep focussed on working well with the land and in your community.

The third factor is quite likely the key to understanding Cain’s experience when he submits a low-grade crop: shame. Very little is said, but then there’s action suggestive of shame’s negative

¹³ Robert Barry Lead, *Through Ecological Eyes: Reflections on Christianity’s environmental credentials*, St Paul’s, Strathfield: 2006, p.167

¹⁴ *ibid.* 1-10

¹⁵ Robyn McPhail, “Rural Spirituality: A Pakeha South Islander Reflects”, in *Land and Place*, ed Helen Bergin and Susan Smith, Accent Publications, Auckland: 2004, p.121

¹⁶ “The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities”, p.23

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.122

antidote, an arrogant fight-back. We know about shame in rural communities: when the bank forecloses, when a member of the family commits suicide. The whole community can feel the shame. Shame turns us inward and narrows our view to the immediate isolated self, who assumes others are casting judgment. To protect our vulnerability we close the door, so to speak, on our connections to others and on the future.

Note carefully this assumption of being judged. Bible study leader Cam Harder talked about this in Canada. ‘Who’s to blame?’ is the automatic question when something goes wrong. Judgment calls for punishment to pay for the error of our ways. And worse still, God is implicated because we assume the Bible’s messages about blessings and curses are to be interpreted as a system of rewards and punishments, with God backing the winners in the system.

Do you know the story in the book of Joel? There’s a plague of locusts, something I’ve come to associate with farming in Australia. I remember hearing about the locusts moving in around Dubbo in spring 2004. In Joel, the locusts strike, the land is trashed and the people devastated, shut off from their God. Commentators have assumed that the prophet’s message is about sin, judgment, repentance and then blessing. The problem is that Joel makes no mention of what they’ve done wrong. All he does is call on the people to return to their God, and offer them hope that the catastrophe will end.

“Their joy has been put to shame,” says Joel (Joel 1:12). Instead of inventing sins to account for the disaster we make more sense of this prophet’s story if we go with his silence on who and what is to blame and think about the situation that has turned joy to shame.

There has been a catastrophe on the land, with mention of a locust plague, a drought and an enemy invasion. We can relate to that: you know the first one, we both know the second and the enemy invasion could be a rather expressive image for the effects of globalisation and corporate power. These things have damaged land and waterways, with harsh economic consequences and therefore a big drop in production. For them that meant they couldn’t carry out their routine religious sacrifices; for us it can mean we can’t afford to attend to our social, emotional and spiritual well-being. Shut off from God; the joy of a good life with the land and the community put to shame; withdrawal, depression and self-rejection.

Joel’s advice to them is to get together and share their sorrows. Lament this suffering that has come at you from outside and, by doing this, get yourselves spiritually connected again. Return to your God. Communal lament takes the shame out into public and turns it back to honour, to the life force, the pride that comes with knowing one’s potential in relationship to people and world.

Honour God and honour yourselves and, with that, let yourselves hear again that the disaster of the present time will end. As Joel puts it, God will destroy the locusts, end the drought, drive off the enemy invasion and restore the land so that your shame will be history. It happens.

What I am pointing to here are biblical tools for a sustainable faith, so that we can live by the Jesus model. It is about tapping into wisdom, as explored in the third big section of the Hebrew Scriptures, and lived in the flesh by Jesus himself. Ecotheologian Celia Deane-Drummond connects this wisdom to the contemporary interest in philosophy in virtue ethics, a move away from pure consequentialist theories to basing morality on certain virtues like prudence, justice, respect and truth. With these qualities in place we can keep alive in our decision-making process the dynamic that integrates environmental, community and economic issues.

And sustainable faith’s best tool is the Sabbath, the key to sustainability at all levels. Sabbath is the pattern of work and pause. The pause gives space for wisdom, for what Ikerd calls ‘common sense’, to listen more deeply and consider more carefully. Ikerd believes that rural churches can help their communities in this challenging time by finding “the courage to reject the arrogance, intolerance, selfishness, and pride that permeate much of global society today...”¹⁸ Faith, hope and

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.28

love are what rural churches must concentrate on: that's the message and the practice we and our communities need.

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