

THE ROLE OF AGRARIAN CULTURES IN LAND REVITALIZATION

Abstract

Current concern for land revitalization is hampered by its dislocation from agrarian cultures that work the land. The conversation is too often between urban elites with academic and professional interests, but usually without engagement with rural communities and agrarian cultures that work the land for a living. Conversation is geared toward systemic change in the dominant culture, but without engaging the local agrarian cultures that work the land.

Anabaptist congregations (local agrarian cultures) in rural communities, while currently “occupied” by industrial agriculture, have a multi-century agrarian history shaped and informed by Anabaptist theology of discipleship, community, and the ethic of love and non-violence. If serious change toward land revitalization is to occur, the conversation needs to engage these rural congregation with a call to return to their historic agrarian/theological roots as a rationale for a regenerative agricultural practice of raising food for people.

Rural pastors cognizant of the Anabaptist/agrarian heritage of rural Mennonite churches have a major role to play in fostering this conversation between urban elites and the rural congregations they serve. However, urban congregations also have a role in establishing local food cooperatives with rural congregations, enabling rural congregations to make the economic transition from commodity production to food production.

Paper

Land loss, the theme of this year’s conference, is not for me a theoretical or academic or even an environmental concern. It is an existential matter involving the very survival of the rural communities and churches I have lived in and served. As a pastor serving rural congregations throughout the Great Plains for the past 50 years, I have lived with the radical decline of rural communities and churches, including those I have served. While the industrialization of agriculture has certainly been the cause for the decline of rural communities, there was nothing inevitable about the acceptance of industrial agriculture as the dominant paradigm of farming communities. Rural churches whose farmers adopted industrial methods of farming lost the traditional spiritual values that have always informed healthy agrarian cultures, and it is only when this loss is repaired that the loss of land itself will be remedied.

As a rural pastor concerned from my seminary days about environmental issues, I felt pretty lonely in the rural congregations I served. Not only was environmentalism suspect in the

rural communities I served, but the larger church also ignored environmental theology emerging in academia and society in favor of more spiritual and ecclesial concerns. The past few decades have largely erased that feeling of loneliness I had as environmental theology became much more a part of the ecclesial conversation. These Rooted and Grounded Conferences beginning in 2014 have only solidified the place environmental concerns have on the agenda of the church.

Yet I'm troubled that these conferences and other initiatives like the Mennonite Creation Care Network too often involve only environmentalists and academics and seldom engage the agrarian cultures (congregations) of rural America that actually work the land. These are the communities that currently contribute most to land loss, but also the communities that have the most potential for recovering the land. While there are always a few practitioners of farming at these conferences, these participants often represent the fringes of the rural community, and the agrarian cultures of our constituencies remain largely oblivious to the matters we discuss in these forums.

Meetings like this also seem irrelevant to agrarian cultures (rural congregations) because too often the conversation is about systemic issues and systemic change at a national and international level rather than addressing the economic and social issues confronted by rural congregations at a local level. So, for example, when farmers in our rural churches are challenged to use regenerative agricultural methods or "go organic," these farmers would like to know how they are expected to stay in business and hold onto their farms, and they'd also like to know how to navigate the social pressures and ostracism that often follows such a transition. What kind of social and economic support are we willing to provide for such farmers?

In the book I've recently published, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle*, about the rural Freeman, South Dakota, Anabaptist community, I documented the agrarian

character of the rural cultures that came to South Dakota from the Ukraine in the 1870s and their transition to industrial farming in the second half of the 20th century. I argue that the rural village life of traditional Mennonite communities, often deemed to be “Die Stille im Lande” by critics, involved instead a symbiotic relationship between the agrarian life-style and the primary tenets of Anabaptism—discipleship, community, and the ethic of love. These tenets of Anabaptism informed the agrarian communities, and the agrarian life of the community shaped further and confirmed the Anabaptist tenets.

It’s clear that in recent decades, since the 1950s, traditional agrarian cultures, including the Anabaptist congregations around Freeman, have acculturated to the industrial mode of agricultural production. They are in the business of raising commodities for a global market and no longer produce food for people. Their use of the land is no longer governed by the wisdom of a centuries-long agrarian heritage, but rather by the technological marvels of agribusiness expertise promising a technical cure for every problem. Farms have grown exponentially larger, driving many farmers out of business. Neighbors are no longer seen as partners in caring for the earth but as competitors threatening their own survival on the land. Outside investors often purchase land in local communities disrupting generational transfer of the land, and further disenfranchising rural communities of their land base.

The economic and social factors pressuring this acculturation to a foreign agricultural paradigm based on governmental policies, multi-national corporate control of agriculture, and the guidance of technocratic methods are clearly evident. The effect of this acculturation on rural communities is also clear—the decline of rural congregations, the consolidation of schools, and the death of towns and villages. Unless the powers of industrial agriculture are challenged and their hold on rural communities is broken, we will continue to see land loss and rural

decline. But how can this be done and what might we do, who perceive the value of the land and its role in a sustainable community and future?

If I am correct that this acculturation is rooted in the loss of traditional agrarian cultural values and heritage, then it is clear that this is a spiritual and a theological issue. While we can point out the fallacies and dangers of industrial agriculture, and I have often done that, we simply end up blaming the victims (the farmers) and raising their defenses. More helpful, I believe, would be an appeal to our spiritual and theological heritage and its loss in our acculturation.

At least in the Freeman community, the loss of our agrarian and theological heritage was precipitated by our acculturation to elements of American theological culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, as we endeavored to see where we “fit” in the American theological landscape, many of our congregations were attracted to Fundamentalism for its Biblicism and conservatism. This was not all bad, of course, and most Mennonite Fundamentalists retained a commitment to Anabaptist tenets such as peace and non-resistance. But it did replace discipleship—following Jesus in everyday life—with the acceptance of a set of doctrinal propositions as basic to Christian faith. Furthermore, it replaced community as the sphere in which God’s redemptive work was operative with a preoccupation on personal salvation and eternal life. The loss of the centrality of discipleship and community undermined two key legs of Anabaptist cultural and theological life, and effectively destroyed the communitarian and ecological basis for our centuries-long agrarian heritage.

What rural congregations like ours around Freeman need most is a spiritual and theological reorientation to the traditional Anabaptist theological tenets of discipleship or following Jesus as central to our faith, community as the sphere of God’s redemptive work in the world, and the ethic of love and non-violence in our relationship with God, others and the natural

world in which we live. A recommitment to the agrarian theological roots of our heritage would enable our churches to move communally toward a more ecologically friendly and sustainable agriculture focused on food production, which is after all the agricultural vocation.

In my writing and in my book, I argue that the mission of rural congregations is to maintain the integrity of their agrarian cultural and faith heritage as counter cultural communities of faith, while at the same time engaging with other local agrarian cultures in the revitalization of the rural community where they live. The primary ways in which this rural revitalization can happen are through the formation of local food systems and land tenure practices like land trusts and conservation easements. Local food systems require regenerative agricultural methods and marketing cooperatives of various kinds. Land trusts or conservation easements remove the land from the speculative market, preserving the land base of the community from outside investors and providing for generational transfer of farmland to future generations. These may not seem like “spiritual” projects worthy of being the missional calling of rural congregations, but in fact this is how generations of agrarian cultures of Anabaptist faith preserved their heritage through the centuries, often as “Die Stille im Lande”, quietly working toward God’s redemption of humanity and creation.

So how is such a spiritual and theological and missional reorientation brought about? Having been a pastor all my life, I know it’s unfair to place this burden on the shoulders of the pastors of our rural churches. Yet they are surely the key toward such a transformation. This requires pastors who understand deeply the history of their congregations, their coming here to America as agrarian cultures, the cultural influences that led them away from their traditional cultures, and the theological rationale for their return to their agrarian heritage and roots. And all

this needs to be done with sensitive pastoral care, recognizing the profound social changes called for by such a reorientation on behalf of farmers and would-be farmers in their churches.

Such pastors therefore require a set of theological, historical, sociological, economic, and pastoral skills that may not be readily now available in the toolkit provided for them by current seminary curricula. It is incumbent on our colleges and universities to rise to the challenge of equipping rural pastors and leaders who can work toward the reorientation and transformation of rural congregations.

Finally, urban congregations concerned for land revitalization have a particular calling to develop relationships with the rural congregations in their areas and conferences. It is often urban consumers like those gathered at conferences like this who are most aware of the environmental and theological factors required for a sustainable future. Yet as a rural person, I've often sensed that urban people view their rural roots and their rural neighbors with disdain if not contempt, as hotbeds of narrow ethnocentrism, prejudice and discrimination. However accurate such perceptions might be, urban churches need to own their rural neighbors as brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling to find their way in the midst of wider cultural shifts that are difficult to comprehend or understand. In particular, urban congregations, as consumers of rural food, have the opportunity to develop economic and social relationships with rural congregations in their area or conference in the form of marketing cooperatives that make the economics of a transition to regenerative and sustainable agriculture realistic and possible for farmers.

Traditional agrarian cultures, or in other words rural congregations, have the potential for enabling our larger culture to move beyond land loss toward land connection for all. Indeed, so long as rural congregations are not engaged in this process, we will see land loss only increase

and grow as the economics of industrial agriculture continues to devastate the land. What are we going to do to engage rural congregations in the reorientation and transformation to their spiritual and theological roots so central to their agrarian heritage?

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