

The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities

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Under the guise of rural economic development, rural areas around the world are being “colonized.” Giant multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of people in rural places all around the globe, including here in North America. Rural people are losing control over their communities, as corporations use their economic and political power to dominate local economies and governments. Irreplaceable precious rural resources, including rural people and rural cultures, are being exploited to increase the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations have no commitment to the future of rural areas; they are only interested in extracting their wealth. This is classic colonialism.

A colonial relationship is established whenever one nation, by conquest or settlement, extends its sovereignty by imposing political and economic control over the people and territory of another. Historically, colonialism was defended by the ethnocentric belief that the morals and values of the colonizer were superior to those of the colonized – that the colonized would benefit from the process. The only difference between the current colonization of rural areas and the previous colonization of territories is the nature of the entities colonizing and being colonized. Colonization today is being carried out by corporations instead of nations and the territories being colonized are rural areas instead of whole nations. Instead of kings or presidents, the rulers of today’s rural colonies are CEOs of multinational corporations. Regardless of differences in the colonizers or the colonized, the consequences are the same.

Rural people everywhere are being told that they must rely on outside investment to stimulate local economic development. Outside investment will bring badly needed jobs and local income and will expand the local tax base. Economically depressed rural communities will be able to afford better schools, better health care, and expanded social services, and will attract a greater variety of retail businesses. Rural communities will become more like urban communities and rural people will be able to live more like urban people. Rural people are told they have been left behind by the rest of society – economically and socially –and corporate investments from outside are the only means by which they can hope to catch up. This same basic reasoning has been used by the powerful of all times to justify their colonization of the weak.

Clearly, in some cases, colonization has brought economic and social benefits, at least to some people. In cases such as North America and Australia, the indigenous populations were sufficiently small to be essentially eliminated by the colonizing immigrants and the nations have prospered economically. Some colonies became strong enough to gain independence and a few are now more powerful than are their one-time masters. But the indigenous people invariably have paid a heavy price for the economic success of their colonial oppressors.

Most colonies were not granted independence until well into the 20th century, only when world opinion shifted against colonialism on ethical and moral grounds. After decades of so-called economic development, the local economies of previous colonies were left in shambles. Indigenous social and political structures were destroyed, leaving the people with no means of self-government to address the shameful legacy of colonialism. Traditional ways of life were destroyed, cultures were lost, economic resources were depleted, and natural environments were degraded and polluted with the toxic wastes of industrial development. The *indigenous* people of virtually every previously colonized country of the world, including the United States, still harbor a deep resentment of their former colonial masters. Political colonialism eventually was abolished because it became obvious that colonization was about economic exploitation rather than economic development. Like slavery, political colonization eventually became morally unacceptable in a civilized society.

However, the “economic colonization” of rural areas continues virtually unchecked everywhere, including North America. The Europeans first settled in rural America to exploit the economic wealth of its wildlife, timber, and minerals. Once these resources were used up, rural areas were left with “ghost towns” where river towns, logging towns, and mining towns has once thrived. In the twentieth century, manufacturing plants were attracted to rural areas by a strong work ethic and low wages. When rural people demanded a living wage, corporations found people in other countries who would work harder for less. Rural America was left with only empty factories and people who no longer remembered how to make a living for themselves.

More recently, corporations have begun to use agriculture to colonize rural areas. 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. Once the remnant resources of rural America have been depleted by corporate agriculture, the corporations will simply move their operations to other areas of the world where land and labor costs are cheaper. Our rural communities will be left with nothing but polluted streams and aquifers, mountains of animal manure, and farmers who no longer know how to farm.

Eventually, rural America will be seen as nothing more than big empty spaces where the rest of society can dump its wastes. Even today, many rural communities compete for prisons, urban

landfills, toxic waste incinerators, nuclear waste sites, or even giant confinement animal feeding operations. All of these so-called economic development opportunities are nothing more than places to dump the human, chemical, and biological wastes created by an extractive, exploitative economy.

Rural economic development today is classic colonialism, pure and simple. The natural and human resources of rural areas are being exploited to create more wealth for already wealthy corporate investors. When the exploitation is complete, rural people will be left with nothing of economic, social, or cultural value. And with today's trend toward economic globalization, corporate colonization of rural areas seems destined to spread to every corner of the world, until every remaining pocket of natural wealth has been extracted from every rural place in the world. This kind of rural economic development quite simply is not sustainable.

But what can rural communities do, and how can rural churches help? First rural people everywhere must reject the extractive and exploitive model or paradigm of industrial economic development. On the surface, industrial organizations appear to be tremendously productive and efficient. But they are efficient because they extract and exploit resources while investing nothing to renew or regenerate the resources needed to maintain their productivity over time. That's why today's corporations must continually seek new places and people to exploit. However, all economic resources must be extracted from either natural or human resources. When all of the natural and human resources have been depleted, nothing will be left to support the economy or to support anything close to even today's human population. Industrial economic development quite simply is not sustainable, not for global society or for rural communities. Rural people must reject the false promises of industrial economic development.

The people of rural communities must instead choose strategies consistent with sustainable economic development. Sustainable development must be capable of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future; it must be capable of maintaining its productivity and value to society indefinitely.

Sustainable development is fundamentally different from industrial development both in purpose and in principles. The purpose of *industrial* development is *productivity*, pure and simple. Its guiding principle is profit maximization, because in capitalist economies, profits motivate greater productivity. The purpose of *sustainable* development is *permanence*, which requires both *productivity* and *regeneration*. Natural and human resources must be continually regenerated to sustain productivity. The guiding principles of sustainable development are those of ecological, social, and economic integrity. A sustainable economy must be built upon the foundation of a sustainable natural ecosystem and a sustainable society.

The purpose of permanence is not predetermined, as we have seen during the industrial era of the last two centuries. The pursuit of permanence is a matter of choice. The people of many rural American communities perhaps unwittingly have chosen productivity over permanence and are reaping the natural consequences of their past choices. To create sustainable communities, the people of rural communities must find the wisdom to choose the purpose of permanence.

The principles of sustainable development are encoded both in “natural law” and in the “laws of nature,” which define the *rightness* of relationships among humans and between humans and their natural environment. Some philosophers define the “laws of nature” as the principles necessary for nature to fulfill *its purpose*, while others admit only that laws describe how the world works, period, denying any specific purpose for nature’s laws. Regardless, the laws of nature are inviolable principles, which cannot be changed and have inevitable consequences, and thus must guide all sustainable relationships between humans and their natural environment.

Natural laws, on the other hand, are the principles that govern relationships among humans. Natural laws include the basic ethical and moral principles that determine whether human thoughts and actions are right or wrong, or good or bad. The principles of natural law have been variously related to the basic nature of being human, to God or some other supreme being, or to the nature of the cosmos and the place of humans within it. Regardless, natural law exists independently of any given religion, culture, society, or political order, applying to all people of all times. Natural law is our *common sense* of right relationships. As with the laws of nature, natural laws cannot be changed, have inevitable consequences, and thus, must guide all sustainable relationships among people.

The principles of sustainable community development can be derived from the principles of ecological, social, and economic integrity. The first principle of ecology is “everything is interconnected,” from which we can derive the principles of *holism*, *diversity*, and *interdependence*. The sustainability of any particular rural community is inevitably linked to its natural environment because people must have a purpose to choose to live in a particular place. The rural environment is far more than a physical and biological collection of plants, animals, and people; it is a whole. The relationships among those physical and biological elements are essential aspects of the community as a whole. Ecological diversity is necessary for resilience and resistance, for regeneration and renewal, and for adaptation and evolution to accommodate inevitable change. Finally, to ensure sustainability, relationships among the diverse elements of rural environments must be mutually beneficial or interdependent. The sustainability of rural communities must be built upon a foundation of ecological integrity.

The principles necessary for mutually beneficial *human* relationships are *trust*, *caring*, and *courage*. These basic social principles reflect a set of common core values that transcend all religions, philosophies, races, nations, and cultures – our common sense of rightness.

Relationships of trust develop and grow among people who are honest, fair, and responsible. When trusts are validated, relationships grow stronger and when trusts are violated, relationships grow weaker. Caring relationships require empathy, respect, and compassion. Caring relationships go beyond impartiality, dependability, and *brutal* honesty. Sometimes we all need mercy more than we need justice. Finally, trust and caring accomplish little without the courage to act. It takes courage to stand up against deception, inequity, irresponsibility, ruthlessness, and disrespect. Sustainable communities must be built on a foundation of social integrity.

The principles necessary for economic sustainability are *value*, *productivity*, and *sovereignty*. Economic value is determined by scarcity – how much is available relative to how much people want and are willing to pay for it. Some of the best things in life are free and others are priceless but a sustainable community must produce some things that are scarce and thus have economic value. Productivity depends on the efficient allocation of scarce resources among competing alternative uses. Sustainable communities must make wise use their scarce land, people, intellect, energy, and money in producing things of economic value. Economic integrity also depends on sovereignty – on being free to choose. Members of sustainable communities must take responsibility for rebuilding their local economies from within, making their own decisions, investing their own time and money, and accepting responsibility for their decisions and actions. Sustainable communities must be built on a foundation of economic integrity.

The sustainability of a community depends on its ecological, social, and economic integrity. Integrity means wholeness, completeness, and soundness; thus, the same basic principles must permeate all aspects of the community. The ecological principles of holism, diversity, and interdependence must also be reflected in rural societies and economies. The social principles of trust, caring, and courage must also be reflected in economic relationships and relationships between the community and its natural environment. And the economic principles of value, productivity, and sovereignty must also be used in creating the non-economic values that result from social relationships among people and relationships between people and nature.

The most fundamental principles of sustainability, however, transcend ecology, society, and economics – the timeless principles are faith, love, and hope. Religion is a common means of expressing faith but the basic principle of faith most certainly is not limited to religion. Faith is simply the ability to believe something that cannot be proven. We accept propositions by faith because we know in our heart, mind, and soul they are true, even though we can't prove them. It is only by faith, for example, that we know that our life has purpose and meaning. We can't prove it, but we know it's true. Lacking purpose, it would make no difference what we do or don't do, or if we do nothing at all. Anything is equally good or bad if we have nothing in particular to do. Without purpose, life would be meaningless – life would make no sense.

Most people probably never question whether life has purpose, but scientists do. “Scientific materialism,” which dominates scientific thinking today, “asserts that all events are due to the interaction of matter and motion, acting by blind necessity in accordance with those invariable sequences to which we have given the name laws.” To scientists, human life is nothing more than a thoughtless interaction of motion and matter moving toward some unknowable yet predetermined end. In the science that has driven industrial development, there is no place for faith, and thus, no place for purpose. Perhaps most important, in science, there is no recognition of our human ability to choose permanence rather than blindly pursue our individual economic self-interest. The people of sustainable communities must be people of faith.

People of faith also have the uniquely human capacity to love. To love is to believe, again without proof, in the inherent goodness of a thing. We typically think of love as existing between two humans, and human love is special because it can be returned. But a person can love an animal or even a mechanical object, a car or a dress, if they believe in its inherent goodness. Love is more about emotion than reason. But even mature love requires no compelling evidence to support it and does not easily accept evidence against it. True love is about faith.

To love *life* is to believe that *life* is good. If life is not inherently good, then continuation of life on earth is not necessarily good. No individual life lasts forever. But, when the purpose of a life has been fulfilled, death is a good end to life. We accept by faith the continuing goodness of life on earth, even after our individual life has ended. To love life is to love the whole of life, because we are all part of the same web of life – the same creation. We are all made and remade of the same molecules, matter, and energy; we are all related and interconnected by the basic processes of life. Our purpose is interrelated with the purpose of all other living things; and part of the purpose of all life is to conceive and nurture new life – to sustain life. The people of sustainable rural communities must be people who love life.

The final principle of sustainability is hope. In defining hope, I defer to a quote from Vaclav Havel – philosopher, reformer, and former president of the Czech Republic.

Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.

The people of sustainable rural communities must be people of hope. Even though they know the odds are against them and know the road ahead will be difficult and fraught with difficulties and disappointments, they know also that the purpose and principles of sustainability make sense, regardless of how things ultimately turn out. In this, they will find hope. They must continue to try new things, even in situations that might seem hopeless. They know in their hearts that something good is possible. And in this, the people of sustainable communities will always find hope.

Finally, what can rural churches do to help build sustainable communities? First, they must find the courage to reject the arrogance, intolerance, selfishness, and pride that permeate much of global society today, including many of our churches. Many churches have put the religious rituals and doctrines that divide above the basic spiritual principles that bind all religions and all churches together. Congregations split over arguments about ritual and doctrine while accepting dishonesty, inequity, and irresponsibility as simply facts of modern economic and political life. Churches hold so-called people of faith to no higher standards of conduct than is expected of philosophical materialists in economic, political, and environmental matters of life. Church members spew words of hatred and threaten acts of violence against other thoughtful people who have committed no sin, but simply hold different religious beliefs. Where is their sense of compassion, empathy, and respect – of love? Churches seem to need religious wars as much as secular societies need military wars to ensure loyalty and patriotism within.

Rural churches today must speak up for the interests of indigenous rural people, and not be apologists for the corporate colonizers. Many rural ministers seem so concerned about losing members and financial support they cannot find the moral courage to preach and teach the principles that must sustain their people of their communities for generations to come. They excuse the destruction of God's creation as a matter economic necessity, while knowing that it can never really be necessary to violate God's "laws of nature." They excuse the exploitation of rural people, who lack economic or politic power, as unavoidable economic reality, knowing we never excuse violations of God's "natural law." Or they proclaim that God will meet every human need, if we will only ask in prayer, knowing that for most of us praying must lead to thinking and working if our material needs are to be met. Rural churches must find the moral courage to teach and preach the fundamental principles of a sustainable human society.

But perhaps most important, rural churches should do what churches are expected to do – what churches should be able to do best. Rural churches should teach and preach the principles of faith, hope, and love. Rural churches must proclaim that our life has purpose, that we must make conscious decisions to pursue a life of purpose, rather than blindly pursue our individual self-interest and accumulate material wealth. They must preach the gospel of faith. They must proclaim the goodness of life and the goodness of all living creatures of the earth and love of the *creation* as a reflection of love for the *Creator*. They must teach and preach a gospel of love.

Finally, rural churches must teach and preach a gospel of hope. Sustainable development is not quick or easy but it is possible. Sustainability movements are underway all around the globe. Rural churches don't need to teach strategies or organize community movements for sustainable community development, although they can certainly be supportive of such initiatives by rural people. Well-developed strategies for developing sustainable communities, such as the Natural Step, are readily accessible by rural people in all parts of the world. However, people choose sustainability only when they come to realize that sustainability is not about sacrifice but instead is about hope for a fundamentally better way of life. Many people have become disenchanted with the pursuit of narrow, individual self-interest. They have learned that pursuit of individual wealth does not result in societal good, and in fact, it isn't even good for the wealthy. The rural churches must preach a gospel of hope – the possibility of a better live for rural people.

Rural communities need not suffer the fate of past colonies, but could have a place of preeminence in a new sustainable global society. Most rural communities are still good places to live and raise families, in spite of their many challenges. Many still have clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for peace, quiet, and privacy, and those that don't can find ways to restore them. Nature can do a lot to renew and regenerate itself, if people give it an opportunity to do so. Most rural communities are still places where people have a sense of belonging, where people know and care about each other, where crimes are fewer and people feel safer and more secure than in most cities. Such attributes are becoming increasingly scarce in today's global society and thus are becoming increasingly valuable. Ecological, social, and economic integrity has great potential value. It is far easier to retain or regain the integrity of rural communities than of most cities. In this, there is hope for rural areas.

But rural people must first realize it is not a sacrifice to care for other people. God created us as social beings. When our pursuit of material wealth diminishes the quality of our relationships, our quality of life is not enhanced but diminished. Rural people must come to realize it is not a sacrifice to care for the earth. God created us as ethical and moral beings. We owe a debt to those of the past that we can only repay to those of the future. When we degrade the earth in our pursuit of material wealth, our quality of life is not enhanced but is diminished. Our material well-being is important, but no more so than our social and spiritual well-being.

This is the role of the rural church in sustaining rural communities. Rural churches must find the courage to teach and preach the message of sustainability as a fundamentally better way of rural life. They must advocate faith in a life of purpose, a love of life and of all creation, and a hope for a better future, for ourselves and for all posterity. The most important role of the rural church in sustaining rural communities is to teach and preach a message of faith, love, and hope.

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For a more complete discussion of economic sustainability, see John Ikerd, *Sustainable Capitalism: A Matter of Common Sense* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005).

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