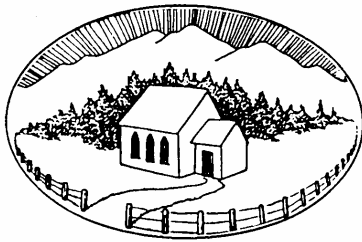


Rural Network News



No. 32

May 2006

Lord, fill my mouth with
worthwhile stuff, and nudge me
when I've said enough.

Rural Network News aims to share ideas for ministry in
neighbourhood and land-based communities.
Te kaitiakitanga, te manaakitanga, te kotahitanga.

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

What does it mean to be called 'rural'?

In rural ministry, the key aspects of being 'rural' are:

- relying directly or indirectly on land or sea and the vagaries of nature for livelihood
- living in communities of neighbours as opposed to the more urban option of communities of interest

International Rural Church Association

Winter is A-coming?

The autumn is just about over, the sap has returned to the roots. Winter is coming as a time to prepare for the next facet of the rhythm of life.

As we close the curtains we must be careful not to hide away from participation and living. We need to welcome the cold crispness of winter that highlights our senses. We smell and think more clearly without the hot dust of summer. In our town, with all the benefits of winter, we need to look at all the new experiences before us. The energy and enthusiasm of the young as they come to work and play in our town. May some of their excitement rub off on us in our daily lives?

We are lucky enough to have visiting our town people from other parts of New Zealand as well as from other countries. May we take time to learn from them and not see them as a "cash cow", but as people who can help us to see things from another point of view and not to close our minds through ignorance or prejudice?

Let us take note of the saying "judge not lest you be judged." Remember that visitors to one's community may be lonely or unwell at times and will need a caring outward reaching community to support them.

The Christ way was to care not just for immediate family and friends. Can we do the same? It is good for us in our particular place to enjoy our winter business. The life-giving qualities of our multicultural and energy-giving community can enrich all that visit and live here over the winter months.

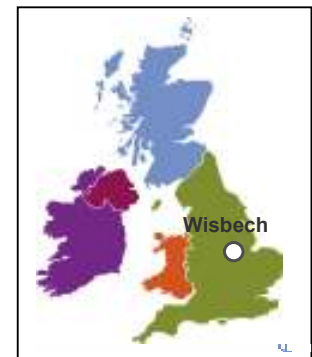
Have fun in your place over winter, and enjoy.

Jan Jenkinson, Methven, Mid-Canterbury

International Rural Interaction

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER:

A RURAL MINISTER FROM ENGLAND VISITS NEW ZEALAND



In March this year Heather Walker, a Methodist minister from England, spent visited a number of rural communities in New Zealand.

She was here on sabbatical programme to explore options for continuing rural church life in a time of change. She felt that the changes they were facing in the Methodist Church in the UK were changes that New Zealand churches of different denominations had been tackling for some years. Perhaps there were things her church could learn from. Also, as those of us who invited Heather to visit us knew, there would be plenty we would learn from her.

Heather came with the gift of asking questions. Add that to a passion for rural ministry and you have catalyst for encouragement and courage to change.

As a feature of this edition of *Rural Network News* we bring some snapshots of days on this sabbatical search from different parts of the country.

But, before that, Heather herself speaks.

Musings on the Rural Church Scene

On 18 February 2006, amidst family visits and trial runs at packing, I walked on the misty fen near to my Norfolk home and wrote this:

God of Aotearoa, God of my homeland
Where are you taking me?

God of the kiwi, God of the wren
What will I hear?

God of the secret Isles, God of our rolling Fens
What will you show me?

God of the Pakeha, God of the Maori
Who will I meet?

God of the unknown, God of my well-walked paths
What will you teach me?

God of the stranger, God of my loved ones
What will I feel?

God of the green fields, God of the city
How will you challenge me?

God of my comforts, God of adventure
How will I grow?

Now as my study time in New Zealand draws to its close, I have been reflecting on my experience in the light of those words.

Where will you take me?

For many years, New Zealand had been at the top of my list of places to visit. But I knew a brief holiday would not suffice - I wanted to meet ordinary people, to savour their lifestyle, to understand how they think.

I am a Methodist presbyter serving in a rural ministry setting in the United Kingdom where circuits and the Connexion as a whole are facing urgent challenges about how the church of the future needs to be structured to fulfil its witness and mission.

I was also eligible for a sabbatical. Having read and heard about all that has been happening in the rural churches in New Zealand over a number of years, the temptation to visit under the guise of undertaking some study was too strong to overcome!

I came half way round the world to visit the plains of Canterbury, the mountains and parks of the Tasman district, the rolling hills and coastal plains of the Manawatu, and eventually, via the architectural glory of Napier, to the beauty and isolation of Northland and the places where the churches' story in New Zealand began.

What will I hear?

I heard stories of courage and vision.

There was the parish with five worshipping congregations (two denominations) in three townships where decisions were made to work together to cut down on ministry costs and reduce the number of buildings they needed.

In the process, those people have found new ways to be the Christ presence. They have persevered, as they see it, in spite of the complications of belonging to two parent church bodies.

I heard stories of growing awareness of what it is to be 'church'.

There was the elderly gentleman who told me how, after a life-time of attending worship and listening to sermons, he had suddenly felt all the teaching he had received had been worthwhile. That was the moment when their Co-operating Parish moved to Local Shared Ministry and he along with the whole congregation took responsibility for ministry.

Since then they have been ensuring that the church has a voice and a presence in community matters. Though very few in number and even fewer able-bodied, those people are making good things happen in their community.

I heard stories of personal growth and fulfilment in serving Christ today.

There was the Co-operating Parish which made the move to Local Shared Ministry because they had not been able to find a minister. In that process, as well as expanding their community outreach, they have found the process of calling and enabling lay people to take on ministry in the church has strengthened them all. They have learned to trust God's guidance, to accept their personal limitations and to be willing to undertake programmes of training and personal development. They are a joyful community, growing in faith and knowledge and delighting in what God is doing though their loving lives.

I have heard stories of determination in places where a few faithful people are resolute in maintaining a worshipping presence against all odds.

I have heard from those who are willing to travel great distances in rural parishes on a regular basis to attend church business meetings (without watching the clock). I have listened in on conversations between people working out what it means for them to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord.

What will you show me?

I saw Marsden Cross where the first Anglican sermon was preached in 1814 and the first Christian mission set up.

I picnicked beside the cairn at Kaeo marking the spot where the Wesleyan mission began in the 1820s, and the site of the French Roman Catholic mission of the 1840s.

I visited houses where the first missionaries had lived and churches too many to count, each of which tell their story of people of vision who came to this land to bring the Good News and whose successors, still as determined, continue the work they began.



Wesleydale Cairn during visit by Churches Together in Northland in February 2006

Who will I meet?

I have met members of congregations in places large and small; clergy of different denominations (including a Methodist presbyter who moved to New Zealand from my home circuit in England – yes, the Methodist family really is small!); some who have been writing about and directing change in the New Zealand churches for many years; innumerable kind and generous Christian folk.

I met two AA members who had mistaken our meeting for theirs, and a member of staff at a petrol station who helped me out when the borrowed car fooled me.

I met shopkeepers who sounded as though they really wanted to know how I was getting along, and cabin crew on aircraft who clearly didn't!

What will you teach me?

I learned that the challenges we are beginning to face up to in Britain were facing the churches in New Zealand a generation or more ago.

Older congregations on fixed incomes; shortage of ordained presbyters; diminishing contact with children and young people; legal requirements of the state; too many buildings to maintain, etc...

I learned that it is important to understand people's background when looking at their present lives.

Those early settlers in New Zealand were courageous, free-thinking people who knew how to look after themselves; full of ideas and able to go it alone in their new country. They were people who had to make up the rules as they went along; who created their own codes for survival. They were people who built their churches of a sensible size and mostly out of wood.

I suspect those factors have enabled the New Zealand congregations to adapt far more effectively than we in Britain could, setting aside worries about the denominational parent bodies whose rules did not fit the changing scene and whose hierarchies seemed unable to adapt to the challenges.

These free-thinking Christians have overcome denominational barriers at local and national level to do what seemed best to meet the needs of their congregations and their communities. Progress has been aided by being able to adapt and alter buildings at a relatively low cost compared with the United Kingdom and, when necessary, simply pick them up and relocate them.

I discovered that the halted process of church union in the 1970s acted as a spur to all those people of vision who decided to go ahead anyway and form Co-operating and Uniting Parishes simply because it made sense to worship and work ecumenically where they were.

Despite the frustrations of having to deal with administration for two or more parent bodies plus the Joint Regional Council, frequent hiccups in stationing of presbyters, and a sense much of the time of moving ahead of the 'rule books', these Parishes have been and still are active and effective in worship and mission.

The most fortunate have been served by open-minded presbyters who were willing to step outside their own denominational 'box' and move with their lay people.

I experienced exciting examples of Local Shared Ministry where lay people from one or more congregations are working together to provide ministry in their churches with the help and support of an enabler but without their own presbyter.

These seem to work best where the enabler role included regular meetings with the ministry teams for prayer, study and mutual support, and where the majority of the congregation was fully engaged with the process.

I still have much to learn about the effectiveness of this system as regards continuity of ministry and of dealing with the people who find it hard to let go.

Questions also remain for me about how future presbyters/enablers will be called and trained within this model of church.

I learned that denominational structures are, at best, not always helpful in supporting and enabling the processes of change and, at worst, actually obstruct fruitful work on the ground.

I came to understand that change is not just for survival but for growth.

Whilst the survival of a worshipping community is a valuable outcome of these sometimes painful processes of change, without individual and corporate spiritual growth, then the church will still surely die.

Also vital is a clear understanding of where Christ is calling his people to engage in mission.

What will I feel?

I expected to feel homesick. I usually do when I am away from home for more than a few days.

In the event, I was far too busy to notice any homesickness except perhaps for the last Sunday in March (Mothering Sunday in the UK) when there was a card for me and a video e-mail message from my grandson.

Otherwise I felt:

- **Uncomfortable** at times when asking my questions: I often felt like the anthropologist who goes along to study a society and leaves having changed the situation.
- **Excited** at seeing ways in which congregations were really working together well and actually making a difference to the lives of those around them and without a minister!
- **Sad** when I sensed the despair of faithful people who have not yet seen God's vision for them.
- **Frustrated** when I met people who Christian work and witness in their daily lives was not understood as mission.
- **Anxious** on occasion about the quality of worship, preaching and teaching that I experienced.
- **Liberated** by the abandonment of the regulated for the pragmatism of the moment.

How will you challenge me?

- **To try to encourage changes in training of presbyters** in order to prepare the church in the United Kingdom for the challenges ahead.
- **To consider my loyalty to my denominational church.** As a Methodist minister working in a Methodist context am I propping up a system which has no future? All along this journey I have asking people about the 'treasures' of their faith.

Where denominational boundaries have been successfully laid aside, and amongst groups of independent-minded people who are growing accustomed to thinking through their faith, I fear throwing out the baby with the bathwater and returning to a pre-credal situation where anything goes.

I need to draw clear distinctions for myself and my congregations between the doctrines of the church fundamental, traditions which modify over time, and polity which can change at one show of hands.

- **To prepare lay people to take their full place in the ministry of the church.** Neither a willingness to volunteer nor even a deep desire to serve God can fully equip a person to lead worship or to preach, and especially in a context where people expect their personal spiritual growth to take place in the context of the Sunday services.

I need to be more effective in helping members of my congregations to recognize their gifting from God and in offering appropriate guidance and training.

How will I grow?

I suspect others will sense before I do what this sabbatical time has achieved in me. All I can say at this point is that I feel I am returning to the United Kingdom with a better idea of the questions to ask.

In all of this, I am deeply indebted to Garth Cant, Bill Bennett, Robyn McPhail and all those many folk who encouraged me to come, spent precious time in conversation with me, opened their hearts to me and shared their homes with me. Thank you all.

Heather M. Walker, Wisbech, England
2 April 2006

ELLESMERE COOPERATING PARISH

When

Heather visited Ellesmere Parish on 7 March 2006.

Where

Ellesmere Cooperating Parish is between the Selwyn and Rakaia rivers, south of Christchurch.

Ellesmere Cooperating Parish is a multi-congregation Parish. The principal centre is Leeston which has services every Sunday, Dunsandel has services every Sunday (one Sunday a month is Anglican led), Southbridge has once service each month and Brookside has two services per month in the evening with the Cooperating and Anglican parishes taking responsibility for one each.

What she did

Heather stayed with Noel and Wendy Dalley and spent a day and two nights in our parish.

She visited Harry and Gail Schat's dairy farm at Te Pirita and was introduced to large-scale irrigation-assisted dairy farming on the Canterbury Plains.

She shared a meal at Mavis Barnett's home at Dunsandel, on her son's sheep farm, where she received an alternative point of view about irrigation.

She was also introduced to the mixed sheep and cropping farm of the Withell family. Sheep and cropping has been the mainstay of Canterbury rural life since the arrival of the first settlers in the 1850's. Large-scale dairying has only developed on the Plains in the last 15 years with the advent of large-scale mechanically-assisted irrigation.

Chris Bedford, Transition Minister of Ellesmere Cooperating Parish, introduced her to the concept of Transition Ministry. Transition Ministry helps churches prepare for the next phase of their life, addressing issues which might hold them back and helping them look ahead with a clear sense of purpose and direction.

She went with Noel Dalley to a Parish Council meeting in the Hinds Cooperating Parish, a parish with several preaching places - most of which do not have a service every week - and locally provided ministry. Heather saw how, with the assistance of a Ministry Enabler, lay people can undertake ministry.

Noel and Heather spent some time exploring issues related to ministry in a multi-congregation parish, particularly without a resident clergy person. Heather enjoyed an open and vigorous discussion with Wendy Dalley about issues of life and ministry in a rural community.

Chris and Sue Bedford, Leeston, Canterbury

MEETING WITH NAPIER/HASTINGS

Continuing her sabbatical of combined travel, rest and study, Heather met with Christian ministers and laity from the Napier/Hastings region in the St Andrew's church hall at Westshore on 21 March 2006.

A diverse group of 12 Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians enjoyed discussing with Heather the joys and difficulties of their particular fields of ministry, sharing with the group the various programmes their churches have implemented as a way of "walking with Christ in the community".

Outcomes from this meeting, which was hosted and convened by Bill and Wendy Bennett, were:

- a. Heightened awareness of the importance of preaching as a way of educating and preparing a congregation for hands on ministry. Tom Libby represents the newly licensed non-stipendiary ministry model at St Francis Church in the Clive Co-operating Parish. He commented that twenty years of good preaching had laid a firm foundation for the amicable gathering of diversity to create a pathfinder model of Anglican/Presbyterian shared ministry. All agreed that solid work of preparation was needed to produce worthwhile fruit.
- b. Suggestions to look outward into the community for opportunities to be involved in local happenings. For example, blessing the swimming pool at the civic opening of new public baths; convening the local Anzac Day commemoration; a barbecue picnic in the local park for Trinity Methodist's 130th jubilee.
- c. Communication: prepare, tell, warn, share, explain, remind, again and again. New concepts have to be owned by all, in order to be embedded as "what we do at our church."
- d. Ongoing planning, for more than just the next five years, is mandatory if we want ministry to be sustained. Also sources of supply need to be in place for what is needed to implement the collective vision of vestry and ministry team.
- e. Succession: each 'worker' ought to be training his/her successor now, while trying to broaden the whole experience. People who attend no other forms or places of worship find it much harder to cope with change.
- f. During Lent "forget sin, death, and resurrection and concentrate on serving with love." In Riverslea Parish, old non-worshipping St Martin's church (now known as Marty's Place) is used for 'sharing the caring' - holding collective hui with other community groups, e.g. exploring funding options

together. A venue for reflective, no strings attached conversation, away from workplace and/or family restraints, something Roger McNeill sees as a desperate need in present day society.

- g. Try giving your church magazine a more secular aspect and therefore wider distribution.
- h. Final words from Heather:
 - Allow the new born to ground us in the reality of bringing the gospel to the next generation.
 - Celebrate the continual re-birthing of our Christian hope.

Deirdre Lee, Bay View, Hawkes Bay

A MEETING OF MINDS AND HEARTS IN NORTHLAND

The Paihia Uniting Church reaps many benefits from those who come to the three accomodation units at our Centre for Re-Creation that is part of our mission/outreach. In March we were priviledged to have the Rev Heather Walker stay with us.

She told us she was visiting New Zealand to learn how small churches were coping with the shortfall in ministers and to explore the shape of rural ministry in this part of the world.

John Hatchard said: "I gained the impression of a remarkably clear mind at work on some of the knottiest problems facing Christian congregations everywhere.

"We met one evening to share with Heather something of the life and functioning of our Parish. In her quest for information, she put some very searching and perceptive questions to us about our mission aims, for which we were remarkably grateful.

"A high point was the Sunday service. From her first words I was aware that something special was going to take place. Then, as she sang the invitation to worship, unaccompanied and in a very true voice, it brought everyone to that still place where one can truly feel the presence of God. Her sermon opened with a passionate but very clear offering on the Passion of Jesus and its significance for us today. Her story of seeing the Oberammergau Passion Play led us to Communion."

What an amazing, loving, down to earth woman of God! She certainly took every opportunity to visit as many places, and talk with as many people as possible. She soaked up, and recorded much of our history and how we are 'being Church' in Northland. We were given glimpses of the life of her parishes and her family. Enough to appreciate that wherever in the world we are we can learn from each other as we all seek to discover how best to be God's people where we are and using the resources available to us. Thank you to

Heather for being such a valuable resource - a filling station - on our journey."

Beverley Deverell, Kawakawa, Northland

TO THE HEART OF THE HOKIANGA

It was a treat to take Heather on a journey from East to West in Northland on the last day of her Study Leave and introduce her to someone a lot like herself: a passionate and compassionate rural minister who quietly and determinedly gets on with the job.

Christina Morunga came to Broadwood around 25 years ago as a nurse. She stayed on and became a person the local Anglican/Methodist church, and the community, looked to for support and then leadership. She married a local kaumatua, who happens to be a Catholic: Ben and Christina are regularly called on for spiritual guidance and up-front leadership.

Christina trained with the Home Setting Programme of the Methodist Church and was ordained in 1998. The parish has been moving towards Local Shared Ministry, with Christina as part of the team, something that has naturally been her way of working.

Heather asked the question: where will the leaders of the future come from? In the past parish ministers have been inspiration and mentor to many who have felt called to train for ministry. Local people may inspire and nurture other locals to join the local team. But with the key role for paid leaders in Local Shared Ministry being that of a Ministry Enabler, will people in parishes feel inspired and called to this role?

It was a conversation that underlined the importance of the local in rural church life along with good connections to the wider church. It is local people, as part of the fabric of the community through work and family, that can be more accessible and effective in offering spiritual nurture to all who might need it. Yet our ongoing ability as churches to provide professional and accountable ministry in our communities needs experience and perspective that stretches beyond local boundaries.

Robyn McPhail, Kaeo-Kerikeri, Northland

An exasperated mother, whose son was always getting into mischief, finally asked him, "How do you expect to get into Heaven?"

The boy thought it over and said, "Well, I'll run in and out and in and out and keep slamming the door until St. Peter says, "For Heaven's sake, Dylan, come in or stay out!"

From RUMORS email newsletter© Ralph Milton

News Through The IRCA Network

Rural communities world-wide are feeling the effects of global economic change. Churches in these communities have a common purpose of sharing the gospel in communities in a way that speaks to the challenges and concerns of change. They also offer good news that relates to the distinctive rural context. Rural churches have formed strong networks within New Zealand and around the world.

3rd IRCA Conference: Manitoba, Canada, July 2007



Brandon, Manitoba, Canada is the venue for the 3rd International Rural Church Association Conference to be held 3-9 July 2007.

Conference Theme “Cry of the Heart: Harvest of Hope in the Rural Landscape” speaks of the pain being sustained by rural communities and congregations and the powerful hope as we hear God’s word to us.

The Local Organising Committee offers international guests the opportunity to fly into Canada during the week prior to the Conference and be met and hosted by congregations throughout the country. Local Chair Catherine Christie says: “those who come from afar will be able to recover from their long flight, and get to know a bit about rural life in a Canadian community.”

On 3 July Canadian and international delegates will descend on Winnipeg from around the country and buses will transport the group to Brandon, where we will settle into the residence of Brandon University.

The keynote speaker is Dr. John Ikerd, Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics from the University of Missouri in the United States. He will speak of the struggles faced by rural communities, and the hope we sustain by the grace of God.

Bible Studies will feature David Webber, a Canadian Presbyterian who was a lumberjack before responding to God’s call to ministry, and Rev. Dr. Daniel Thiagarajah, from Sri Lanka, who inspired those present at the Chennai Conference in 2002.

Small groups will identify workshop themes around issues of shared and global concern, seeking specific actions that we can be involved in together as we work for God’s will to be done in our rural ministries.

There will also be: a day of immersion into some aspect of Canadian Christian work, with field trips to choose; time for reporting from each international church

represented at the conference; time for sightseeing and cultural programs (hopefully even a local baseball game); time for prayer; and time for IRCA business. Some particular events are being planned for spouses or partners.

Catherine says: “We hope there will be representation from all parts of God’s wonderful world in Canada in July 2007.”

Indications of interest in attending the IRCA 2007 Conference in Brandon, Manitoba, 3-9 July 2007 can be sent to: Catherine Christie cchristie@sasktel.net

Or contact Dave Ruesink druessink@tamu.edu Secretary of IRCA or me at chirmac@xtra.co.nz (ph: 09 401 7554, fax: 09 4017555).

Robyn McPhail, IRCA Chairperson

Andy was a regular member at his church. Always in the same pew every Sunday. Always at every church event.

But Andy had an argument with another member and stopped coming to church. So the pastor decided to pay him a visit.

It was a chilly evening. The pastor found Andy at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor’s visit, the man welcomed her, led her to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited.

The pastor sat down but said nothing. The two of them watched the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone.

Then she sat back in her chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember’s flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word was spoken.

The Pastor glanced at her watch and realized it was time to leave. She slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As she shook Andy’s hand at the door, she could see the tears in his eyes.

Andy was back in his regular place in church the next Sunday.

From RUMORS email newsletter ©Ralph Milton There’s no charge to subscribe to RUMORS. Send an email message to rumors@joinhands.com with SUBSCRIBE in the subject-line

Some Websites of Interest

www.ruralministry.com/ - the Center for Theology and Land in the USA with information and links, including ecology resources for “transforming faith and society”.

www.bangor.ac.uk/rs/pt/rm/ - the Centre for Studies in Rural Ministry, a partnership between University of Wales, the Arthur Rank Centre and St Deiniol's Library.

www.canadianruralchurch.net is of particular note with the Canadians hosting the next IRCA Conference in July 2007; link to www.agri-ville.com/spiritualvignettes where Joyce Sasse's monthly newsletters are stored.

Two other USA websites - www.pcusa.org/rural and www.pcusa.org/smallchurch - could be of interest.

www.presbyterian.org.nz/2848.0.html is the site for the International Rural Church Association and for Trans-Tasman rural networking within New Zealand. This site makes a link with the archive for “Rural Network News” which is accessed directly at www.schoolofministry.ac.nz/RuralMinistry/

Sustaining the Family Farm

A VIEW FROM NORTH AMERICA

These notes were made by Canadian Joyce Sasse from a presentation by John Ikerd on 16 February 2006

Commodity organizations, government agencies, agricultural universities and agribusiness corporations have insisted for some time that family farms are unsustainable, and act as if these farms and families are no longer worth consideration.

Dr John Ikerd, agricultural economist from the University of Missouri, not only insists that family farms are where the future of agriculture lies, but wonders about the positive possibilities that could have been realized if as much research effort had been put toward supporting family farmers as has been put toward promoting industrial agriculture.

Viable family farms are regenerative living systems that flex and evolve to accommodate each new generation. These families have the capacity to consider the needs of the land, the animals, and the farm as well as the needs of the family (both present and future) in making decisions. “The most critical question today is whether they can achieve economic permanence.”

Typically successful family farmers market their livestock and crops into specialized niche markets or sell fresh or value-added food products directly to their customers. “Many are identified with labels such as organic, biodynamic, ecological, practical, innovative or holistic.” Often they collaborate with like-minded independent food retailers - supermarkets, restaurants,

public institutions - to gain access to larger members of like-minded customers.

In criticizing “industrial agriculture”, which is the darling of the corporate world, Ikerd argues that this model is clearly NOT sustainable.

Its primary function is short-term productivity. Efficiency is the primary means through which they achieve productivity. People become labour units. “It is more economically efficient to find new people and new communities to exploit.” The natural and human resources of the earth are degraded and depleted, and no consideration is given to leaving a legacy that will help meet the needs of future generations.

Joyce asks: Sustainable Family Farms - a Dream or a Reality?

While my heart aches for those farm families that have gone through so much agony and grief as they surrender to the economic forces that leave them poor and powerless, I see other farm families who have been so bold to do what neighbours and nay-sayers said would never work. These “new family farmers” find their work is meaningful, and their economic endeavours are providing them with modest incomes.

From an economist's point-of-view Ikerd says: “the most striking difference for these new farm families is that they must be prepared to extend themselves vertically, become better connected (rather than larger in scale), be fully committed to the regeneration and renewal of resources, and extend into marketing and distribution by connecting with their final customers.”

Ikerd is an economist who includes the value of “social capital” in his considerations of sustainable family farming. Positive relationships fostered between family members, with members of local communities, with customers and with the land are important assets in his ledger. The family, the community, the market, the land and the environment are all living organisms that sustain and support each other.



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Contributions of news, views, insights on anything to do with the rural church and its gospel mission gratefully received.

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