

Voice of the voiceless: justice for people of the land

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Context

Rural communities in Aotearoa New Zealand experienced significant change during the twentieth century. For families whose livelihood came directly from the land, or indirectly in supporting industries and professions, the life that had been was no more. An earlier century's influx of European migrants had meant irreversible change for the first residents - tangata whenua; 20th century rural dwellers experienced the effects of another migration - from country to city. For Māori and Pākehā¹ communities alike, a life that had its own integrity and measure of sustainability was lost. Urbanisation was now the trend.

Another trend was the expanding world in which we dwell. The founding of the United Nations, increasing trade to replenish war-starved markets, and improved telecommunications and air travel all contributed to the new normal as the twenty first century dawned. It has become a world of globalised markets with local economies dictated by trans-national drivers, greatly reducing local decision-making power. Rural voices have in effect been dispatched to the economic and political outfields. Where once government, professional, and retail business were locally based, the hub has shifted to larger towns and cities. Previously rural voices were heard and heeded in parliament, and distinctive rural concerns well represented on local bodies. That has changed.

The globalising of markets put downward pressure on commodity prices, commodities accounting for the bulk of external rural income. Many farmers found ways to adapt, working smarter with science and information technology to become not just producers but product developers and marketers. More frequent urban-rural interaction has blurred the edges (country people now drink lattes), and with a wardrobe containing town clothes and working clothes, plus a job that involves being inside at the computer as well as out in the elements, rural people have proved their ability to live in two worlds. But this skill has come at a price: it is the world they share with urban people that provides the lingua franca and the urban perspective that now dominates decision-making.

Something similar happens for bi-lingual people working with mono-lingual people. With the language in common the base for conversation, those who speak only one language are prone to consider it alone necessary to convey meaning. For the bi-lingual person, however, it is the the side-lined language that speaks from the heart and to the heart, so the conversation misses out on a significant chunk of experience. The voice expressed through this other language is pushed beneath the surface. For rural people, this happens whenever their distinctive rural concerns do not translate readily into an urban view of life. Their own voice is not heard.

For the church in the rural context the issue of justice is this issue of voice. After a brief introduction to the international rural ministry movement, this chapter explores ways for rural churches to give voice to the voiceless. It concludes with a distinctively Northland example of action for the sake of justice which will benefit the whole of the motu - the nation of New Zealand.

Bearers of hope

In 1984 rural Christians in Australia and New Zealand began a movement that was largely a response to these changing times. A conference entitled “The Rural Church Perplexed” gathered people with experiences in common of extensive drought, slumped commodity prices, and political change. They arrived weighed down: they went home affirmed in their role as churches, supporting rural communities and rebuilding a sense of the value in being rural. As “Bearers of Hope” (1988), rural Christians continued to work through “Changing Seasons Changing Times” (2008). The most recent gathering focussed on “Resilience: Building Robust Rural Communities”.ⁱⁱ

This antipodian movement contributed to establishing the International Rural Churches Association (IRCA). Collaboration and mutual support has inspired our own variation on globalisation, putting rural Christians from diverse contexts in connection creates a sense of solidarity across political and economic dividing lines. New Zealand sheep farmers wanting better access for their lamb sales into the USA heard US rural churches tell of communities emptying out as farming became less and less sustainable. Sri Lanka proved to be a great market for milk powder from our dairy farms, but it came at a cost to local farmers trying to sell their fresh milk. These were the kind of stories we were hearing as IRCA got underway.

An early international conference in South India launched the theme “Voice of the Voiceless”. Is it fair that the voices of rural people have been ignored in the push to produce food on a large scale, as in the “Green Revolution” in India? Is there justice in selling economic development in rural areas (mining in the US and Australia, tourist development in coastal Sri Lanka), with companies and developers reaping most of the benefits? And whose voices will be heeded in the contest for water, cities pitted against farmers (Australia) and nation against nation (Africa, South Asia, Europe)? The answer this rural church movement is giving is a resounding “no” to injustice and “yes” to life for the land and for its people. Through these kinds of issues rural churches have heard their call to mission: to work together and give voice for people being silenced by powers harming their life and livelihood.

New Zealand churches giving voice

Pastoral care and its focus on building and repairing relationships is a non-negotiable for rural church life. Such service to the community can be invaluable given that neighbourhood relationships are crucial to the fabric of rural communities. You cannot pick and choose who you relate to when you live in the country. You make the best of the people you happen to live among, being supportive in difficulties, at other times letting be, and most importantly you don't rock the boat. If asked, rural churches would probably not name justice as a mission focus. And yet when the church is going about its core business of pastoral care and spiritual nurture, the question “is this fair?” often comes up. Being pastoral leads to advocacy. Reading the Bible together leads people to challenge things that are unjust.

One example comes from the 1980's when, across New Zealand, rural people were receiving a triple whammy from weather, markets, and government. Deregulation changed the rules, commodity prices continued to slide, and protracted drought hit the regions. Rural church members not only prayed and supported one another and their community, they mobilised to work with social services to provide professional help. There were acts of solidarity, like going along with a person applying for government income assistance, providing an extra voice for confidence if needed. Church members joined with Christian Social Services and

Federated Farmers to challenge government to provide structures and procedures which have become routine for a rural crisis. Now when a crisis like a drought is formally declared, Rural Support Committees immediately kick in, along with emergency income support, tax deferrals, and others means of assistance. This does something to mitigate the sense of failure and shame which farmers are prone to when their land and stock suffer. It has also made recovery more likely once the crisis passes.

There have been impacts too on rural/urban relationships. Now when weather extremes hit the land, city people are just as likely to be chatting about it in the cafe as their country cousins over the back fence. Mainstream interest around climate change may have added to the attention, but it has been rural people who have had the biggest impact on awareness, giving voice to what is happening in the outfields. There is a renewed confidence in being rural, a confidence which is not shy to speak out. Underpinning this has been the faith base of rural communities - small churches and the spirit of hope they represent.

Another example of spiritual and pastoral motivation becoming a basis for advocacy is the response of rural churches to seasonal labour. From the early days of the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme Pacific workers have brought an unfamiliar feel to the local community. With concern that a 'them' and 'us' mentality might make life even harder for the workers, separated as they were from families and struggling with the unaccustomed cold climate, a Marlborough church took to heart the biblical admonition to “love the alien, giving him food and clothing”. The resulting interaction broke down the barriers and laid the foundation for team work. The local church shared leadership in worship with Ni-Vanuatu Christians and, in response, they were invited back to Vanuatu to share in mission work there. Working with mutual respect as equals is itself a prophetic statement, a symbolic action that has been the foundation for local church efforts to ensure fair conditions for the guest workers, and to support and mentor them so they can return home with their families' financial expectations fulfilled.ⁱⁱⁱ

How to offer hospitality and support for those who are here “for a season” is a recent task in the Hawkes' Bay. Concern about negative, even racist, responses from the locals, as well as health issues and the consumer pressure to spend too much of their earnings called for a response:

The Waiapu Anglican Cathedral had a group of parishioners travel in 2011 to visit workers in their home villages in Vanuatu ... There has been talk of a chaplain being provided, but the challenge would be the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups involved.^{iv}

This is a work in progress and rural church advocacy for seasonal workers is more potential than actual. Yet, wherever affirmation and support is given to these visiting workers through personal contact and shared worship and study, rural Christians are helping them get a fair deal.

Whanaungatanga - solidarity

Also more potential than actual, but ripe for the picking, is an opportunity of national benefit. Rural church people have experienced changing times, loss of voice, and in some cases loss of the land. This would put them in prime position to appreciate how these things have impacted even more seriously on Māori, historically and in contemporary times. As farming

has become more industrialised, rural poverty has deepened for those without sufficient land and resources to match market demands. Although Māori and rural Pākehā are often very different in financial terms, rural churches are a relevant point of contact and a potential locus for solidarity. Our standing apart from the predominantly urban and secular culture of our nation provides an often unrecognised spiritual bond. An example of recent experience in the Mid-North of Northland points to opportunities for giving voice for justice.

In this region, it is as if two worlds operate independently with some interaction: the world according to Tikanga Māori, or traditional lore, the local people (ngā hapū o Ngāpuhi) continuing to maintain life-ways they have lived for generations; and the world according to the Crown, or New Zealand as the majority see it. Churches in the Mid-North hold a special place in this situation: the bond between Māori and Church was established in the early 1800's, continuing with ups and downs ever since; Māori churches provide a significant and often vibrant Christian presence across the north; and ministers, whether Māori or Pākehā, are accorded respect in Māori gatherings. The spiritual bond is such that through our tupuna Ihu Karaiti^v we are whanaunga/relatives. A return to Te Ao Māori, Māori world values, is promoted widely to restore well-being for the North, a vision whose spirit is at one with the very core the Christian Gospel. Indeed we stand together against a common enemy, the dominant culture of consumption and competition.

In 2009 the Whangaroa community held a Remembrance for an incident of great grief, at the time, in its antecedents, and in the subsequent 200 years. The attack on the ship *The Boyd* occurred in the context of overwhelming disease and upheaval following the arrival of the first Europeans; many people were killed in the attack, with the result that European vessels steered clear of the area for many years; and, for two hundred years, the telling of the story has been controlled by Western voices. Māori have been asked, Pākehā say, but they have not in fact been listened to. This is not a matter to be told in answer to direct questions. If it is to become known more widely, the history handed down from Whangaroa tūpuna to their uri/descendants of today needs a process called “hearing to speech”^{vi}. The listener must first build a relationship: then kōrero/speaking can begin.

This began to happen through the Boyd Remembrance process. Organising became itself a work of partnership, with a committee of Māori and Pākehā struggling together to be true to both partners. We learned from every cultural mistake made, accusations about Pākehā motivation were listened to without self-justification, and with time it became trusted as a new way to break the cycle of misunderstanding and hurt. From the Māori perspective the spiritual element is core, so the churches were invited to provide a lead, Māori tuākana, as mentors, guiding Pākehā teina, as younger siblings, in the karakia crucial to whakawatea (preparing the way) through a journey of blessing around the Whangaroa harbour and prayers throughout the Remembrance weekend. The spirit which came to pervade the event was a spirit of hohourongo, healing. What is more, the way the churches and local Baha'i worked together, something of a surprise to the wider community, was a witness to partnership and whakawhanaungatanga - building community.

Giving voice to the voiceless remains an agenda item for Northland churches. For Ngāpuhi history is not a list of grievances inflicted on victims but a narrative of agency driven by people with vision for the future. It is the story of a people who, through their rangatira, engaged directly and equally with the rangatira/king in England. Significant markers to the relationship were Ngā Whakaminenga (Assemblies of rangatira) in the early 1800's, Te

Whakaputanga (Constitution) in 1835, and Te Tiriti (Treaty) o Waitangi in 1840. For the people of the North, Te Tiriti is not the starting point and basis for complete crown authority but one in a series of agreements for *shared authority*. Is it fair to ignore this narrative? No, say Ngāpuhi Māori.

It is language that gives us voice, reo/language is at once reo/voice. The language of faith provides a shared language through which to work together. Rural churches in the North have an opportunity to stand in solidarity with Ngāpuhi's "no" to ignoring their narrative. It is not fair that their voices have not been heard: is it fair if they are not heard now? It is fear that is the biggest barrier to acknowledging what Māori are saying when they proclaim "Ngāpuhi did not cede sovereignty" and, for this, churches carry the rongoa, the antidote. We are keepers of the faith that says: "do not be afraid". We trust God/Atua/Io Matua Kore and, with that foundation, we can risk "hearing to speech" the voices of whanaunga.

i Used here for people of non-Māori ancestry.

ii <http://www.irca.net.nz/oceania.html>

iii Dawn Daunauda in *Rural Network News*, No. 40, August 2009, 1-2

<http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/national-ministries/rural-ministry/rural-network-news>, accessed 27.08.2013

iv Jenny Dawson in *Rural Network News*, No. 46, December 2012, 7, *ibid*.

v A Christian can speak of Jesus as ancestor, uniting as family of Christ.

vi Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 99.