RURAL RECONNAISSANCE

**#40. How Does a Rural Community Cohere?**

It is no secret that rural communities like Freeman are struggling, While Freeman may be relatively better off than other rural communities, we still confront the demographic reality that our rural population is at least a third less than it was a hundred years ago. That certainly affected the morale of the congregation I served as pastor, and our community has seen the closure of a number of rural congregations in recent decades. Much of the responsibility for this decline can be ascribed to the convergence of a number of factors—the bureaucratic functioning of government agencies, the rapid increase in the size and influence of global corporations which control the inputs and the products of the agricultural economy, and the simultaneous explosion of technological innovations. Together these forces effectively take control of the agricultural enterprise in rural communities, and in the process disenfranchise them.

Still, having lived in rural communities all my life and after four decades of being intentionally present in those settings as a rural pastor, I have come to the conclusion that the gravest threat to rural communities is not these external forces but rather the internal life of rural communities themselves. Strong rural communities that work together for the common good of the community are amazingly effective at subverting the destructive effects of the forces described above. But when people in rural communities begin to live for themselves alone, the community fails to cohere or hang together in any meaningful way. The community becomes a collection of private operators in competition with one another for land and advantage.

It is only as the people in rural communities work together for the common good that they can retain some control over the land of their community in the face of the imperial powers decimating rural communities. Otherwise, private landowners not only have to cope with the bureaucratic, corporate, technocratic powers, but are also in competition with one another for more land, and in the process rural communities are weakened.

So how can rural communities cohere? Agrarian cultures like that which has been the reality of the Freeman community for most of the 20th century are built on cooperation and mutual trust. This community was built by people of various backgrounds and ethnic identities and denominational loyalties who put aside both their personal interests as well as their differences and came together to work for the common good, establishing cooperatives and building the health, education, commercial, civic, transportation and communication infrastructures that continue to serve us well.

We haven’t lost the sense of everyone coming together to work for the common good of the community. But it can hardly be denied that this commitment to the common good has been weakened in recent decades by several factors. First, our community has grown to be more diverse, and we who have historic roots in the community have not always known how to incorporate this diversity and utilize the gifts these “newcomers” bring. Second, we who have these historic roots have sometimes allowed these old loyalties to take precedence over the welfare of the community as a whole. Third, we have all been caught up in the individualism of the dominant culture which puts personal fulfillment ahead of the common good.

Projects like the proposed fine arts/earth center have the potential for bringing us together in a new and powerful way as we invest our lives and energies in the welfare of our community and its future. We need to recover that commitment to the common good of the community which characterized the heyday of the Freeman community.

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