



The Church of Scotland

God's Own Country

A Practical Resource for Rural Churches

Rural Theologies



RURAL THEOLOGIES

Foreword

Over the three years of the Working Party's deliberations and enquiries, it has become clear that there is and can be no single 'rural theology'. Theologians and lay thinkers have a variety of approaches and language to describe their reflections on the relationships between the Creator, the creation and the creatures. In addition, many of the views of 'a rural theology' have been expressed by city-dwellers who base their thoughts on perceptions rather than experience, creating a kind of theoretical debate which is not based in the realities of country or coastal living. The Working Party has decided to seek the considered response of a variety of individuals whose lives and work are involved with rural living and who know its challenges and rewards, its burdens and freedoms. We offer two articles as a starting point for your reflections – you may find them helpful; you may disagree radically – either way, they are there to encourage you to strive for an understanding of your relationship with God, the land and sea, produce and harvest and the visitors and locals in your community.

It is intended that this enquiry should continue, and the Rural Strategy Team will commission further theological reflection. If you register on the Rural Church Database you will receive information about future articles and can request copies or access them on the rural web-pages at www.resourcingchurches.org.uk

A Theology of Creation

Rev Colin Williamson

Any review of the purpose of the rural church will of course be mainly a discussion of worship, mission and service as appropriate to today's congregations set in country parishes. It will, however, serve to moderate pragmatic considerations of numbers, buildings and purpose if at an early stage some thought is given to the sanctification of space.

An Eloquent Witness

In Scotland at the beginning of the twenty-first century the national church has lost many of its tokens of influence and place. There is no longer an assumption that any religious body is due special place in a secular society. It may be suggested that this generation has seen the final death of Christendom in Western Europe, which begs the question as to whether the concept of Christendom ever sat well with the Gospel in the first place. However, the kirk building in its village or set among its fields was never a triumphalist symbol of establishment. It was the touch of benediction upon the land, an eloquent witness to the Christ who is Lord of space and not just of the minds and souls of men and women. Just as Sunday, the Day of Resurrection, sanctifies

the week, claiming time for Christ until every day is the Day of the Lord, the country kirk, perhaps the second or third on the site in a millennium, is a prayer for the land and the beasts as well as for the folk around. In the Orthodox sense, not always understood in the West, it 'deifies' space.

Redeemed humanity is not to be snatched away from the rest of creation, for creation is to be saved and glorified along with the children of God.

"The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God ... (for) the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (Romans 8:19-21)

"Christ took flesh and so has made possible the redemption and metamorphosis of all creation. So the rural church stands as an ensign of hope for the land for here is the Redeemer really present in the midst of his people in Word and Sacrament so that the place becomes none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven". (Genesis 28:17)



A Priesthood Towards Creation

So it is that at harvest thanksgiving, whilst today's congregation will wish to support the sharing ministry of the Church around the world and offer prayer for responsible stewardship of the earth, it is important that the first fruits of local produce continue to find a place in the sanctuary. We are not merely giving thanks for these things as benefits to us; we are allowing them to come home in the presence of their Creator.

Being in Christ implies participation in his priesthood towards creation. Thus the use of material things becomes for the Christian a matter of Gospel witness. In former times the glebe of a rural parish was more than part of the maintenance of its ministry. "God's acre" which, in many parishes, was the only land not owned by the estate, was a significant statement that the church was not a spiritualised sect. It had a stake in the land. In a similar way the field which Jeremiah bought at Anathoth was to remain an earnest (a part payment given in advance to confirm a contract) of ultimate redemption for land and people.

There is ample record of how many parish clergy in Scotland and England during the nineteenth century were leaders and innovators in livestock breed improvement, land drainage and crop rotation. The Reverend Henry Duncan (1774-1846) of Ruthwell "... felt it a duty to show an example here, and with this in view had brought into operation the various improvements in the science of agriculture as they were successively published. His little territory, in short, had come to be the model farm of the district. Many were the experiments in draining, ploughing, in reaping etc. which from time to time were made under his inspection; and so well had he succeeded in fertilising his fields, that among his less active neighbours, whose farms gave token of their indifference, it was sometimes remarked that 'surely the special blessing of God rested on the glebe.'"

Memoir of the Rev. Henry Duncan DD 1848

Use of glebes in recent times has not in every case been such a witness to Gospel values. Would it be fanciful to hope that today's Christian community, at a time of crisis for agriculture in Britain and of threat to the earth itself, might consider it a Christian duty to take thought as to its relationship with creation and begin to show this with respect to its own land?

The attitude of St Francis to creation may have been simple but it was far from naive. In a profoundly theological sense Francis understood that created things, animate and inanimate, have a right and a longing (cf St Paul) to know their maker. By the touch of humans, God will be known to our fellow creatures as either capricious and selfish or as faithful and loving. Creation shares with us a common origin in the loving purpose of God. Creation shares with us the effect of the Fall. Creation shares with us the hope of redemption in Christ. We are priests of this.

This priestly relationship should be found in the Church's understanding of creation and in the way the Church contributes to the ecological debate. The Church's concern is not merely that the earth and its resources be preserved for succeeding human generations; rather, it will be an advocacy on behalf of creation itself for which the Christian is in loco Christi. The priestly relationship should be found also in an informed interest in the ethics of land management, animal welfare and scientific advance generally. The theological starting point of common origin and shared hope of redemption in God removes many of the anomalies which confuse discussion of creation over against humanity.



In terms of the parish, the priestly relationship might in former times have been evident in the use of the glebe as noted above. It may be hoped that space be given in the life and worship of a rural congregation to the relationship of the community and its members to creation. It is not for the Church, for example, to prescribe how farmers shall work the land and husband their stock, but the Church would be remiss if the Christian farmer, with all the pressures upon him, were left unaware of the sacred dimension to his touch. There are some practical opportunities: The local body responsible for the church's fabric and property should become accustomed to praying for it, not as a possession, but as representing the material world in which the Saviour was incarnate and which is drawn into the praise of the Creator.

A rural parish might adopt an annual form for the blessing of the land within its bounds. Since the fifth century some traditions have observed Rogation (the three days before Ascension) as a time for processions and special litanies. It would be a good exercise for a congregation to devise its own form for an annual spiritual 'beating of the bounds' when at various points of the parish, prayers of thanksgiving and intercession would be offered and a blessing given.

There are occasions which very clearly call for ministry for which the land cries out and which its owner should welcome. One example may serve. In the 2002 Foot & Mouth crisis there were echoes from the Old Testament. *"How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away."* (Jeremiah 12:4) When Joel addressed himself to a famine which had brought suffering to people, animals, and to the very land itself, he promised God's restoration, *"Fear not, O Land ... Fear not, you beasts of the field ... Be glad, O sons of Zion."* (Joel: 2:21-25) Again we see the relationship which Paul takes up in Romans in the light of Christ, that created things look to us for the touch of blessing which prefigures the ultimate redemption of all things. As the Church will bless a house for the sake of those who live in it, the Church should be prepared also to respond to any invitation to pray for the healing of the land and to bless it from God. To be prepared to stand in the fields alongside a farmer whose animals have been afflicted, his land darkened by tragedy, and to voice God's redemptive blessing over it all, is required of the Church.

RURAL THEOLOGIES

Listening for the Heartbeat of God

Rev Dr J. Philip Newell

One of the favourite images in the Celtic tradition is that of John the Beloved leaning against Jesus at the last supper (John 13:23). It was said of him that he thus heard the heartbeat of God. He became an image of listening within life for the beat of God's presence. The emphasis is on listening within every moment and listening within ourselves and within all things for the beat without which there would be no life. The practice is of an inner attentiveness that can lead also to greater outer awareness and to a passionate commitment to care for one another and for the life of creation.

Origins

What exactly do we mean by Celtic tradition? What are its major features and what is its history? The name 'Celtic spirituality' is a modern term. We use it to describe an ancient phenomenon. It refers to a stream of Christian spirituality that was born in the 4th-century world of Ireland and Britain. It is distinct from what, on the other hand, can be called the 'Mediterranean' tradition, which developed its distinguishing characteristics in the world of Constantine's Roman Empire. Just as we use the term 'Scottish history' to include references to the development of a people who only later called themselves Scottish, so we use the term 'Celtic spirituality' to identify features of a spirituality that formed in that part of the world which only later became known as the Celtic world of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Made in the Image of God

There are two main characteristics that distinguish the 'Celtic' tradition from the 'Mediterranean'. The first is the Celtic belief that what is deepest in us is the image of God. Genesis 1, with its description of humanity made in the image and likeness of God, is a foundational text. Everything else that is said about us needs to be said in the context of this foundational truth, that what is deepest in us is the sacredness of God's image. The Mediterranean tradition on the other hand has wanted to say that what is deepest in us at birth is our sinfulness. This has had the effect of seeing grace as essentially opposed to what is at the heart of human nature.

A 19th-century teacher in the Celtic tradition used the analogy of royal garments. In the 19th century royal garments were still woven through with a costly thread, a thread of gold. If somehow the golden thread were removed from the garment, the entire garment would unravel. So it is, he said, with the image of God woven into the fabric of our being. If somehow it were taken out of us, we would unravel; we would cease to be. The image of God is not simply a characteristic of who we are, which may or may not be there depending on whether or not we have received the grace of baptism. The image of God is the essence of our being, and sin has not had the power to undo what God has woven into the fabric of our being.

The belief that what is deepest in us is the image of God has a number of radically important implications for our spirituality. It is to say that the wisdom of God is deeper in our souls than the ignorance of what we have become. It is to say that the beauty of God is truer to our depths than the ugliness of what we have done. Similarly it is to say that the creativity of God and the passion of God for what is just and right is deeper than any barrenness or apathy in our lives. And above all else it is to say that love, the desire to love and the desire to be loved, is at the very centre of the mystery of our being, deeper than any fear or hatred that may hold us hostage.

This is not to be naive about the power of sin and the perversion of what has gone wrong in our souls and relationships. It is simply to say that what God has planted at the core of our beings has not been undone by sin. The 9th-century Irish teacher, John Scotus Eriugena, said that we suffer from an infection of soul, or what he calls a 'leprosy' of soul. Just as the physical disease of leprosy has the power to distort the human face, making it appear ugly and grotesque, so sin has the power to infect the countenance of the soul, making it appear unnatural and even monstrous - so much so that we come to believe that that is the true face of the soul. In the Gospel story of Jesus healing the lepers, when he offers them the grace of healing he does not give them new faces. Rather he restores them to their true faces.

One of the favourite figures in early Celtic legend is the 3rd-century Christian contemplative, Antony of the Desert. He even appears etched into the designs of high-standing Celtic crosses. Antony was remembered as saying to those who came out to see him in his desert hermitage, 'When you die and go to your place of judgement, you will not be asked whether you have become another Antony, or another St Paul or St Mary. You will be asked whether you have become truly yourself.' In the Celtic tradition there is a passionate and rigorous emphasis on repentance. Repentance, however, which simply means turning around, is a turning around not to become someone other than ourselves. It is a turning around in order to be truly ourselves. It is a turning away from the falseness of what we have become to re-turn to the true depths of our nature.

Grace and Nature

Grace and nature are both gifts of God. They are not opposed to one another. As Eriugena says, 'Nature is the gift of being and grace is the gift of well-being.' Nature is a sacred gift. At the heart of the gift of our human nature is the image of God, knitted together in our mother's womb. Yes, it has been infected by sin. Yes, it has been covered over by the falseness and inhumanity of what we have done to ourselves and to one another. And yes, it needs what Eriugena calls 'the medicine of grace' if it is to be healed. But grace is given not that we might become other than natural or somehow more than natural. It is given that we might be truly natural. It is given to free us from the unnaturalness of what we have become. The Celtic tradition in fact refers to Christ as 'the truly natural One', not as the supernatural one. He shows us the true face of our soul, made as we are in the image of God.

The second main characteristic that distinguishes the Celtic tradition from the Mediterranean tradition is the belief that creation is essentially good. Again Genesis 1 is like a foundational text. At the end of each day in the creation story is the phrase, 'And God saw that it was good'. Then at the end of the sixth day are the words, 'And God saw all that had been made, and behold it was very good'. In the Celtic tradition, creation is viewed not merely as something that occurred at one point in the past. Creation is forever being born. It is forever coming forth from the womb of God, from the realm of the invisible into the realm of the visible. And God forever sees what is created as essentially good.

Not only is creation viewed as a blessing, it is regarded in essence as an expression of God. In his commentary on the prologue to St John's Gospel, and in particular the words, 'In the beginning was the Word ... and all things have come into being through the Word', John Scotus Eriugena says that all things have been uttered into being by God. If God were to stop speaking, he says, creation would cease to exist. Creation is a theophany, i.e., a showing or revealing of God. At the heart of the Christian mystery is the belief that God is love, that God is self-giving. All that God does, therefore, is a giving of Self. Creation, the great work of God, is essentially an offering of God's Self. It is a Self-disclosure to us of the mystery of God.

In relation to the question, 'Where do we look for God?', the answer is not, 'Away from creation', but rather 'Deep within all that has been created'. Within ourselves, within our children, within all that has been spoken into being we can listen for the expression of God. Eriugena says that God is speaking to us through two books. One is the 'little book', he says, the Book of Scripture. The other is the 'big book', the Book of Creation. This is not to be naive about what has gone wrong in creation. It is not to pretend that creation, like the human soul, has not been infected by sin. It is to affirm, however, that creation is like a sacred text that we can learn to read in our journey of knowing God. It is also to say that what we do to matter is a spiritual issue, whether that be the matter of our human bodies, the matter of the body of creation, or the matter of the body politic and how we handle the resources of the earth. All these matters are central to spirituality in the Celtic tradition. In the Mediterranean tradition, on the other hand, there has tended to be a separation of spirit and matter. The mystery of God has been distanced from the matter of creation. What we do to creation, therefore, too often has been regarded as not an essential part of our spirituality.

A Re-discovered Understanding

The Celtic tradition was formally rejected by the Synod of Whitby in the year 664. Part of the debate at Whitby reflected the Celtic mission's conviction that it was continuing the way of the beloved disciple who had leaned against Jesus at the last supper. The Synod's rejection of the Celtic tradition was a tragedy for Western Christianity. The reality, of course, is that it has lived on in the Celtic fringes of Britain over the centuries. And today it is being recovered. Scottish spirituality has been heavily influenced by many aspects of the Mediterranean tradition; another part of our Scottish inheritance, however, is the Celtic stream. The reclaiming of it can be an important resource for spirituality in the 21st century. It can help us listen again for the beat of God's presence in this moment and in every moment, in our own lives and in the life of all that has being.

MISSION OPPORTUNITIES

All-age Outreach Through Environmental Action Mrs Eleanor Todd

An Ecology of Grace

The challenges of the human-induced environmental crisis are huge: climate change, resource depletion, pollution, food production. It would be easy to despair. 'Eco-Congregation' allows churches to meet the challenge not with despair but with grace, beginning with small changes by a few people in one place, and becoming a movement reaching tens of thousands of people (inside and outside the Church). In doing this, we are witnessing to our faith that God has not abandoned his creation. Like Moses on the threshold of the Promised Land, we are 'choosing life' and following God's way, so that we and our children may live long in our land.

Eco-Congregation embodies the philosophy of Church without Walls in a very down-to-earth and practical way. Eco-Congregation churches find themselves being shaped by a new understanding of the Gospel, of the Creator who became part of his creation and who forms the kingdom from the dust of the earth. They are shaped by the locality - not only the people, but the soil, the rocks, the water and wind: the bio-diversity. They are shaped by new friendships, finding previously closed doors of communication opening into the community and across the Church. They are also shaped by unexpected gifts, as members with environmental skills or knowledge or connections - sometimes people who have previously been on the fringes of church life - take on key roles.

What is the Eco-Congregation Programme?

Since 2001 churches have been engaging with environmental issues with the help of the Eco-Congregation Programme. They have also found themselves engaging with local schools and organisations, with young people, with new forms of worship, with other denominations, and with people on the fringes of the faith community. These churches are urban and rural, large and small, affluent and deprived. Some already had considerable knowledge of environmental issues, others were starting from scratch. Of the 150 churches involved in Eco-Congregation, I have yet to hear of one which has not found it useful: over 50 churches have gained the Eco-Congregation award in recognition of their work.

A Flexible Programme

The programme is adaptable to all kinds of church context. All churches are asked to take action in three areas, summed up as spiritual, practical and community. Spiritual is about making the link between environmental issues and the Christian faith. Practical is about reducing the environmental impact of church life. Community is about taking the environmental message out beyond the church walls. A church which demonstrates to independent assessors that it has taken action in each of these three areas - to an extent within the capacity of that church - can receive an Eco-Congregation award.

As well as providing the framework of the award scheme, Eco-Congregation provides a wide range of resources to help churches to become more environmentally friendly. Firstly, there are twelve written modules, covering all areas of church life - worship, theology, children, young people, bible study, buildings, gardens and graveyards, finance and purchasing, lifestyles, community work and global issues - which provide a comprehensive toolkit of ideas and information. Secondly, there are local networks of Eco-Congregation churches who through meetings and e-mail contact exchange ideas and experiences, support each other, and make contact with local organisations. Thirdly, there are newsletters and a website providing the latest news and information.

A Wealth of Responses – Local Church Examples

You could almost count the congregation of Carllops Church in West Linton on your fingers, but it is exceptional amongst Eco-Congregations in that the entire congregation is a member of the Green Team, and almost everyone in the parish has got involved in the Church's environmental activities. Through the Edinburgh network they are also building relationships with city-centre and suburban churches which although very different are – with an approach which is right for them – involved in the same programme.



Many of the congregation at Dunscore were involved as parents, pupils or teachers in the local school, so as an Eco-Congregation and an Eco School it made sense to work together. Initiatives like litter-picks, second-hand book fairs and an environmental newsletter delivered to the whole community were the result of collaboration between the two organisations, deepening friendships and increasing understanding through shared practical action.

St Saviour's in Bridge of Allan took their Sunday School out of doors when the weather was fine. Torphichen church in West Lothian also saw the potential for Christian teaching in the beautiful countryside on their doorstep. They enlisted the help of the local Wildlife Trust to run evening bat watch walks. The neighbouring church of Pardovan, Kingscavil and Winchburgh brought nature into the church by producing banners depicting the story of the Creation in a celebration of biodiversity. Then they took the Church out of doors by creating a garden of plants mentioned in the Bible, as an educational tool. They linked Biblical and environmental themes in worship too, using Noah's ark as the basis for a service about climate change, led by young people.

St Andrew's Episcopal Church in Brechin was able to provide a comprehensive recycling service to the people of Brechin through their shop in the village centre. Sellable second-hand items raised money for the church, while all kinds of other homes were found for every unwanted item, from blankets for the dolphin sanctuary to rags for the steam railway. St Andrew's environmental work also took account of the fact that their parish incorporates some of Scotland's most beautiful scenery, in Glen Esk. There, they refurbished their retreat centre to high environmental standards and built a sensory garden to help all kinds of guests - from Dundee youth groups to disabled visitors - to appreciate the beauty of the natural world both in the landscape and close at hand.

Dalbeattie church in Dumfries and Galloway teamed up with a local environmental organisation to hold worship in the local forest.

Several rural churches of different denominations around Inverness, including Elgin, Invergordon, Aviemore and

Dingwall, started out on the programme at about the same time. People from each church met in the middle, in Inverness Episcopal Cathedral, to share ideas, plans and experiences so far. They discovered common themes. For example, most were considering building-refurbishments so useful information and contact details were quickly exchanged.

Building work provides an excellent opportunity for churches to get involved in environmental thinking. Kilmore and Oban filled the ceiling of their new church centre with skylights, to maximise natural light. Westray church in Orkney saw that the rural setting itself could provide their church with power, and thanks to a grant from the Scottish Community & Householder Renewables Initiative made their church fully self-sufficient in energy. They installed a wind turbine, a ground-source heat pump, and for backup a generator which runs on bio-diesel - but is rarely needed.

Cupar Old Church in Fife made a contribution to energy saving which was just as important, although perhaps less glamorous and certainly less expensive. Members of the congregation bought lots of loft insulation, climbed up into their church roof, and put down a double layer of it, ensuring their energy bills would go down and their church stay cosy.

The small church of Bowden in the Scottish Borders, instead of embarking on one special project, integrated a range of good environmental practices into church life, including recycling, ethical investment and a range of simple energy saving measures. Having received their award they plan to get the larger, linked congregation of Melrose involved in Eco-Congregation, which would offer scope for more ambitious shared action.

Rural churches with links to the land are well placed to consider the pressing environmental issue of global food production. Fairlie in Ayrshire is not only a fair trade congregation, but led Fairlie to become Scotland's first Fair Trade village as a major part of its Eco-Congregation award work.



With so many pressures on church funds, a church green team is very lucky to be given a budget of its own. This did not prevent the “Earth Keepers” group at Dyce church in Aberdeenshire from making ambitious plans to invite speakers and take environmental action. They ran a sale to raise funds which gave them the freedom to be creative

The Kilmore and Oban Green Team also showed an enterprising streak, producing fairly-traded organic cotton shopping bags with the Eco-Congregation logo, available to churches around the country.

Iona Abbey is an unusual kind of rural congregation with many visitors from all over the world, but the kinds of activities which gained them an Eco-Congregation award are ones which many rural churches could copy. Their island pilgrimage demonstrates to the many visitors to the island how ‘thin’ the dividing line between the natural world and the divine world is.

St Machar’s Cathedral in Aberdeen is a city congregation but was bequeathed a piece of countryside on the fringes of the city, a site important both for bio-diversity and recreation. Instead of selling it to developers, a team of volunteers from the church maintained it as a nature reserve with the help of the local Ranger.

Failing to protect nature separates us from God because we so often turn to nature to find God. Through Eco-Congregations people can learn more and as a group find ways to care for God’s creation. The framework of spiritual, practical and community ensures that churches integrate environmental thinking into all aspects of church life and consider it from several perspectives. The resources and networks provide ideas and support.

Through Eco-Congregation your church is linked to a wider community of Christians concerned about the same issues, from the local green team to Regional Networks to our sister programmes across the UK and strong links with similar work across Europe and Australia. Finally, the award scheme recognises churches’ achievements, encouraging their own congregation who often feel inspired to live up to their award; encouraging churches throughout Scotland to see environmental awareness as a growing Christian movement. It’s also important to demonstrate to the local community that people of faith are not only taking environmental concerns seriously, they are taking action.

To find out more about Eco-Congregation and get involved go to www.ecocongregationscotland.org

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