



LEADING IN A NEW SPACE: PART 2

*As followers of Jesus, we belong in the one true story that gives us hope.
Right in the places where we live, God is remaking the world.
Our churches are being called to join the Spirit working out THIS story where we live.*

In the previous post we wrote about the ways in which, across all kinds of systems and institutions, we are 'moving into a world we've never seen'. We proposed that existing forms of congregational life and the professionalized clergy designed to lead them cannot address this new situation. This does not mean the end of congregations. As we wrote in *Practices for the Refounding of God's People*, it calls for the refounding of church life in the local and a reframing of what it means to lead.^[1] Existing congregational and denominational systems are stretched beyond their limits. We have compared this fragility to the ways drainage and sewage systems have become unable to deal with the climate events now regularly enveloping us. These systems

worked well in the world for which they were designed seventy or a hundred years ago but not in today's unstable environment. Our desire is to see congregations thrive in this unraveling. We've spent thirty or more years working with pastors and leaders around the world. We are committed to their thriving as agents of God's mission. Our desire is to assist Euro-tribal churches to be missional communities in this unraveling of late modernity.

But there needs to be a wakeup call. There is fear and consternation about Christian life across the West. Leaders are awakening to the fact that COVID isn't the sole reason for frayed congregational life. Vulnerabilities have been exposed by this long pandemic and can no longer be ignored. Congregations are concerned about their survival and clergy have little idea what to do. Many, if the option is possible, are taking early retirement. While some seminaries report higher enrollment, they are also witnessing a shift away from standard, professional pastoral roles. Chaplaincy training is growing as well as 'church planting' courses, where those enrolled have no intention of going into 'full time' roles in congregations. This is not a criticism of institutions but a plea for us to recognize that the systems and institutions created over the 20th century for forming leaders, cannot engage the space into which we are moving.

We're in a moment of institutional and structural unraveling. We want to lay out proposals for addressing what we might do. But, first, we have to be clear about what's at stake in this call for a refounding of congregational life and its leadership. As we looked for ways to describe the scope of these transformations, the reflections of James Rebanks, in his book *Pastoral Song*, continue to offer a helpful perspective.^[2] Just as many of us cannot imagine church without the existing forms of congregations and the pastors we hire, Rebanks, as a farmer, had to come to terms with the reality that the plough, that iconic farming tool, actually damages the structure of the soil. It is so utterly counterintuitive to everything we know about farming. What does this mean?

WE THOUGHT PLOWING WAS HELPFUL

...in the past thirty years we have learned that plowing is ecologically disastrous...^[3]

The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there. ^[4]

Who could have imagined that this essential practice for farmers, plowing, might not be? Rebanks has a family farm in the Lake District. His book, *Pastoral Song*, is as vivid accounting of what is happening and what has to happen to our churches and their leaders as is the Governor of New Jersey's reflection on the inadequate sewage and drainage systems of the city. For Rebanks the primary images shaping his sense of what has to change are industrial farming and the plow. If we are to grasp what is at stake for our world and how, as God's people, we address

it, we must pay attention to what Rebanks is telling us. His book chronicles the near demise of the small mixed farm, and its regeneration, as growing numbers of farmers awaken to the destructive effects of industrial farming on the land and communities.

Pastoral Song is written like a three-act play. The first act describes farming life up to the midpoint of the last century, before the onset of industrial farming. It was epitomized by his grandfather from whom Rebanks' knowledge and love of farming first came. The second act describes his own awakening to the great transformations in farming from the 70s onward – the era that introduced the hegemony of Industrial farming. It was a time of complete transformation when technology (in the forms of sophisticated tractors, the chemical treatment of land through fertilizers, the introduction of grasses not native to the land and a focus on intensive monoculture through crops and animals) came to be viewed as the panacea for maximizing efficiency and reducing the supermarket price of farm goods to a bare minimum. This was farming dissociated from the land, dependent on chemicals and shaped by experts with no relationship to the everyday rhythms of people and land. A global revolution in industrial farming swept away the family farm and the local economies that had grown around it for many centuries. It eviscerated the experience of the local farmer, their knowledge and husbandry, that had shaped these local, mixed farming. By the end of the millennium, evidence was emerging that industrial farming was damaging soils, rendering them void of nutrients and making them dependent on the chemical fertilizers experts sold to farmers. The layers of local knowledge were all but lost, as workers were forced to move on by a form of farming that needed only a few people to drive machines and apply chemicals. In Rebanks' words:

The countryside that feeds us has changed. It is profoundly different from even a generation ago...the more we learn about this change the more unease and anger we feel about what farming has become (15).

Rebanks observes that the worse the situation became 'the more people seemed to gravitate to charlatans with grand promises and ready-made scapegoats to focus all their anger on' (170). What had been devastated were forms of farming that productively served their communities. Driving this uprooting were the new narratives of consumer goods, supermarkets and cheap food for urban dwellers. All these narratives of success and progress were separated from what was happening to the land and the people of its communities. These were the narratives of upward mobility, freedom of choice, cars, suburbs and a way of life turned in on itself, with little sense of its effects beyond one's own, limited context. Undergirding this cult of cheap food and progress were the technocratic elites, turned out by distant schools that trained professionals with little connection to the land. Their 'tools' were chemical fertilizers and massive tractors designed to produce maximum efficiency. What replaced local wisdom was a narrative of 'consumers', 'choice', 'taste', 'options' and 'freedom'. The third act of Rebanks' book describes a journey back towards a more sustainable farming rooted in the wisdom of the local and dependent upon each other. For Rebanks, this journey can no longer be an option. The crisis is of such that a major transformation of imagination and practices are required. He understands

this is going to 'take time and faith, and radical structural changes in our relationships with food and farming' (191).

He observes that farmers have become strangers to the fields that feed us. Something parallel has occurred to congregations over the last 70 years. They, too, have become strangers to the neighbours and neighbourhoods in which they live. Rebanks observes:

Everything that happens on a farm is affected by the era it exists in, it is shaped by a host of powerful external forces. We are dangled like puppets, pulled to and fro by invisible threads... (235).

Such "threads" for congregations and their leaders involve their enthrallment with success, with techniques of measurement, prediction and the diseased need to manage outcomes. We are implicated in, and confronted by, congregations instituted for a world that no longer exists. We have a schooled, clergy-elites trained to manage these systems, but anxiously trying to fix structures designed for another time. The change we need is not an adjustment but a change of imagination. Tools and practices we've considered essential may now be unhelpful. Rebanks states:

But in the past thirty years we have learned that plowing is ecologically disastrous...This news is staggering - and hard to take in for many farmers...Our civilization rests on the plow (and the chemical tools of the post war period) and yet the plow is a problem. So we are having to figure out how to farm...that means changing how we farm and thinking again about tools we have come to rely on (246).

In this unraveling, many of our taken-for-granted institutions and structures are, increasingly, incapable of addressing the challenges we confront. Current forms of congregations and the clergy that serve them are not capable of addressing the world unfolding before us.

This is staggering. It's hard to take. There will be denials. Many clergy, teachers and congregations are economically dependent on these tired structures. There's a lot that needs to be said about what we can do and how we can do it. But we have to start with the recognition that, like Hurricane Ida and the crisis of our farms and food security, radical change is needed. We are at a fork in the road where choices and decisions need to be made. A kingdom response to our collective crises as God's people requires difficult choices and painful change. The congregations we created to service a consumer, affective, experience-oriented, identity society have to be remade. This means we have to re-imagine leadership.

[1] Alan J. Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West* (New York, Church Publishing, 2018).

[2] James Rebanks, *Pastoral song: An Inheritance* (Vancouver, BC: Penguin Random House, 2021)

[3] Rebanks, *Pastoral Song*.

[4] J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine* (London: William Collins, 2017). First published 1967.



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