

**CHURCH OF IRELAND**

**CHURCH IN SOCIETY COMMITTEE**

**THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**(Republic of Ireland)**

**WORKING GROUP**

**Draft Booklet:**

**CHANGE IN RURAL IRELAND –**

**LIFE AFTER SUGARBEET**

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## **1. Introduction**

In this short paper we will be looking at the problems in rural Ireland, looking first at a biblical context and then considering the forces for change with some of the possible responses. We are, essentially, trying to put into the mind of the church some of the questions that face rural people and their families and neighbours. We have in mind the strength of the Church of Ireland's rural heart. We are trying to address that heartland and to recommend how it might inform its own thought and activity for the future. This is neither a political tract nor a business manual: simply a pastoral reflection with suggestions for prayer, thought and action. We are aware of the smallness and of the local nature of many of the communities that we are addressing. This gives a particular character and indeed a particular effectiveness to the potential contribution of the Church of Ireland to society in this area.

## **2. Biblical Background**

It is not simply the case that in the ancient Near East and in New Testament times most people lived in rural settings so, in consequence, the culture of the writers of the scriptures is rural. Throughout the biblical writings there is tension between town and country, with town, or 'the city', being seen as the seat of civilisation and enlightenment. There are many other relevant strands woven into the biblical tapestry as well. Examples are offered here. Some may be suitable for parish or college discussion. All bear upon our thinking about rural Ireland today and the vast changes that it faces.

### **Prophecy**

The prophets are not slow to proclaim connections between the divine will and the need for both social justice and right stewardship of creation. Classical passages here would be Hosea 4 and Isaiah

11. In both of these chapters there is a strong eschatological dimension that should never be absent from Christian thinking.

“Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”

Hosea 4.2-3 NRSV

## **Genesis**

The scope and majesty of the creation story is the obvious reference here, continuing with the cosmic tale of our first disobedience, through to Babel. (Genesis 1 – 11.9) A most important aspect of this is the tragic conflict of the cultivator with the hunter-gatherer, of the encloser with the free man. This tale, Cain and Abel, tells us about ourselves and about how God views us. It is dark, violent and sombre, like much in rural life to this day. The later chapters of Genesis have relevance also. We learn a great deal about the need for pure and sufficient water, for example, by reading about the wells of Gerar in chapter 26.

## **The Law**

There is a great wisdom and justice in the Holiness Code of Leviticus: the thoughtful country dweller should always ponder chapters 19 and 25 of that book. This scripture should be read in the light of the profound simplicity of Israel’s idea of ‘the land’ and all that it signified to Abraham and his posterity. The resonance with rural Ireland arises again and again. No comment is needed on Deuteronomy 19.14.

“You must not move your neighbour’s boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess.”

Deuteronomy 19.14 NRSV

There are nuggets of gold buried throughout Deuteronomy, nuggets that one should look up for oneself, like 20.19-20 and 23.24-25.

## **Romans**

Sometimes the New Testament echoes the thunder and the majesty of the Old. Take for example St. Paul in Romans 8. So much in that chapter reflects the Law and the Prophets and fulfils them in the light of the New Covenant:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that 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. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Romans 8.18-25 NRSV

## **The Gospels**

After Paul had written his epistles the evangelists were moved to write the Gospels also. We cannot fail to be struck by the small-town, village and country background to almost all of Jesus' teaching. Nobody in rural Ireland has the excuse, common in Europe, that because of their urbanisation they cannot relate to what Jesus teaches. It is all there: sun, moon and rain, the round of the seasons, the livestock, the crops, the families, the rural crafts, and indeed the begrudgery, the over-intimate, over-critical knowledge of the neighbour and every detail of his business, familiar in the home context. Irish country people know what it means to be 'the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand'. They do not need the tiresome convolutions of the suburban church as it tries to explain the meaning of those words.

It is difficult to get the measure of this mighty tapestry in a few words. We need the help of such as J.S. Bach, Jan van Eyck, Peter Breughel, Claude Lorraine and George Eliot.

### **3. Church Tradition**

There is a long history in Ireland of church engagement in the pastoral welfare of rural society. The most important element in the story, in each place, is the parish itself and its history. Indeed local studies are often the best way of appreciating how things of this sort have evolved. A few examples of general themes can also be offered.

The early Church in Ireland was organised around monastic communities which lived and worked as part of the fabric of their areas, aiming to provide centres of care and excellence not only in worship and education but also pastoral care over a wide range of needs, including those that we would now classify as medical, dental and veterinary. Gradually, with the coming of Norman governance, this

pattern was superseded by the growth of parishes and dioceses, with the enclosed religious orders prominent as successors to the monks and nuns of the Celtic tradition. The Cistercian order, and others like it, were a conscious reaction to the Benedictine tendency to concentrate in towns. The vision of the white monks was to bring social care and improved practices to rural life. We see part of this inheritance today at Mellifont, Jerpoint and many other places.

After the Reformation new traditions sprang up. Many people have laboured within the tradition of the Church of Ireland to improve rural life. Bishop George Berkeley of Cloyne is a remarkable example from the eighteenth century. Not only was he a celebrated writer, philosopher and evangelist, but he provided with selfless devotion for the needs of the poor in his diocese in the 1740s. The Quaker influence was felt in many parts of the country from the eighteenth century onwards. Sometimes this took the form of a complete community, with its own projected employment, as in Prosperous or Ballitore. In other cases, the Quaker industrialist would be established as a conspicuously just and caring employer, especially in the milling and textile industries.

#### **4 The Story So Far**

Ever since the Second World War the economy and society of rural Ireland has been crucially influenced by European and world factors in a way which is ever-changing and over which there is little or no local control.

The Common Agricultural Policy of what is now the EU is the most important single determinant of rural policy and action by government and other agencies. From the start this was conceived as a vast instrument of control. It arose in a society whose experience was dominated by the memory of World War and all its horrors of starvation and dislocation. Food security within Europe – that is, security for both producer and consumer – was the paramount consideration. Europe needed to be

capable of feeding Europe in the new environment of regional peace. This broad objective of peaceable stability remains in place, but the means to achieve it have now to be radically different. There has arisen, first, a more accessible and interdependent world in which European producers can no longer be considered apart from others. There is growing consciousness of the duty of the rich world to assist the poor, and not to impose ever-mounting debt together with trade barriers erected against the least well-off producers. Perceptions of the farming industry from within the consumers of the EU have greatly changed. Farmers are seen less as vital producers and are all too readily identified with pollution, over-pricing, degradation of the landscape and bad employment practice. From modest beginnings, the environmental movement has grown to be a major preoccupation. Climate change is no longer the talk of a few and the green imperative is seen ever more clearly. Fossil fuel has to give way to more sustainable and acceptable sources of energy. The riskiness of the modern world was dramatically illustrated in September 2001, and that could work against the pressures of liberalisation and globalisation. It might even move the EU closer to its original vision of self-security.

The effects of trends such as these has been to make rural society in Ireland a fast-changing place with radical new priorities imposed on it. The farming industry now has many objectives. It must cater for the needs of the environment and of biodiversity. It must avoid over-production. It must reclaim the trust of the public as the principal guardian of the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. It must explore all possibilities of diversification without abandoning the traditions of food production suitable to the temperate zone. It must adapt with comprehensiveness and rapidity to the high standards of compliance with rule and regulation now required, particularly in the areas of health, safety and the environment. All must be traceable, accountable and transparent. He who used to put his hand to the plough must now put it to the computer keyboard. And, in response to this, the consumers must appreciate the effort gone into producing quality food. The reshaping of the rural world is not something proceeding with smooth predictability. It operates in fits and starts

in a way that is not always to be expected. For example, the Irish tradition of dairying as the pre-eminent farming activity is under strong challenge, particularly with the droughts of Australia and other places causing a huge rise in grain prices worldwide. The best recent example of a seismic shift – seismic in both magnitude and suddenness – is perhaps the 2006 termination of sugar beet processing and all that that implies for the 8,000 farmers affected.

The people who are living with these things – and the trends noted here are only samples – do not form a highly organised industry with few homogeneous units of production that are easily controlled and managed. The situation is, rather, one of great diversity and fluidity. Traditionally Irish farming is in family owned units of a relatively small size, where amalgamation and reorganisation of holdings is inhibited by reluctance to sell land. This characteristic of rural Ireland is not well adapted to respond to the stresses imposed on it, let alone to be proactive in its approach. There is, in other words, much stress in the farming community. The stress exhibits itself in many ways, from the huge growth in off-farm income and in the numbers of part-time farmers, to the sad prevalence of suicide in country places.

In all this there is an obvious role for good education. The one-teacher National School is the traditional image of rural schooling but this is no longer valid; new schools are usually approved as 3-4 teachers as a minimum. The one-teacher school had many weaknesses: the teacher might well feel professionally isolated and its small size and minimal staffing meant that it was difficult to provide additional amenities such as special needs education, music and IT, and sporting facilities were often limited. The larger school is more able to provide these but inevitably serves several communities rather than nestling at the heart of one. Many children also have to be transported: while many more parents now have cars, there is certain inflexibility where school buses have to be used, which makes it difficult for children to take part in activities after hours.

These problems apply a fortiori to second-level schools. The days are gone when a secondary school of fifty pupils could be viable. With a much wider curriculum, including science subjects demanding practical laboratory work as well as computers, language laboratories and PE facilities, a much larger school with a correspondingly larger catchment area is needed and the problems of transport and participation in out of school activities are even greater. Children in remote communities may be sent to boarding schools, or weekly boarding (returning home at weekends) which may have the advantage of giving them wider horizons and expanded opportunities but effectively removes them from the community. Protestant minorities, being sparsely spread, are particularly aware of these problems.

The rural community itself has changed. The commuter zone has spread – in Dublin, north to Drogheda and south to Arklow and commensurate distances to the west (County Carlow is now spoken of as commuter country). Traditionally, even where the husband commuted, the wife remained with the children and became part of the community, but now both may have long commutes. Even when at home, their children use the internet and television, so many of their needs are met in a wider, if perhaps “virtual” community. Thus, even in “rural” areas, it cannot be assumed any longer that children are aware of the agricultural way of life. Contact with this has to be formalised but this is getting more difficult. Children at school in a South Dublin suburb could recently be taken on foot to a local farm; but that farm is now devoted to the Irish farmer’s most profitable crop and is itself a new (and expensive) housing estate. Thus, the risk is that even where farms are available, they may be “showpieces” rather than working farms.

The church has an obvious role in this context. It needs a strong sense of awareness of what is actually happening in the rural world and why, before it can sensibly apply itself to its pastoral task. A great strength of the Church of Ireland everywhere is the depth and extent of its local knowledge. It is locally and individually that the matter mainly impacts on any pastoral organisation. At the same

time there needs to be systematic appreciation of what is happening, an overview, if the response to present needs is in any sense to be rational or useful. The church also needs to take account of certain particular movements and initiatives that would help to inform and enrich its work. Obvious examples are the movement for Fair Trade and also community experiments like that in Cloughjordan.

## **5. Fair Trade**

The most widely recognised definition of fair trade was created by FINE, an informal association of the four main fair trade networks (Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International, International Fair Trade Association, Network of European Workshops and European Fair Trade Association):

Fair trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, which seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalised producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.

In Ireland we have already been expanding our initiatives by developing Fairtrade Towns and Cities. This is quite a difficult status to achieve and is a measure of the commitment of a town or city and its businesses. In May 2006 Bantry joined the other established Fairtrade Towns and Cities in Ireland; Belfast, Clonakilty, Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Kinsale, Limerick, Thurles, Waterford, Wexford and Mullingar. Dublin is hoping to achieve status as a Fairtrade capital in the near future. If we can adapt in our consumption of products to support Fairtrade, surely we can adapt in our production of products to complement this progress.

## **6. The Future for the Farmer**

### **The Farm Itself**

Whatever may become available by way of diversification and off-farm income it is obviously the case that the staple way of life for many people in rural places will be centred on the farm. The main steward, guardian and manager of the landscape of Ireland will be the farmer, in the future as in the past. Behind this generalisation lies a new generation in many farming families, a generation of able, energetic and well-educated people ready and willing to face the future. With all caveats allowed for, these people need scope and understanding as they develop their way of life in a rapidly changing world.

Food production cannot help being important, on a worldwide basis. The regulatory regime for sustainable and renewable energy is in its infancy and clearly the upcoming farmer must take seriously the need for bio-fuels in all their diversity. At the same time, and overlapping with that, the need for cereals and meat production will continue, as will dairying and poultry in some shape or form. It is worth mentioning the obvious but sometimes obscured point that all trends and statistics point to the view that farming is changing but not abolishing itself.

This simple statement of a complicated truth has many social and pastoral implications. The younger generation needs to be given unfettered responsibility and it is good that state pension arrangements now allow their elders, in many cases, to depart from full time work with dignity. It is good that education has become more rounded and better suited to the life of the sole trader who must have many skills over a wide range never contemplated by his or her forebears. It is to be hoped that the technical and regulatory regime will not keep the entrepreneurially-inclined farmer over-dependent on advice agencies. Socially, farming provides not just an income but a way of life. The implications

of that for child-care, with the absence of the stress of commuting, and often of the mortgage as well, should compensate for an income somewhat lower than the farming partner of a rural household might otherwise earn. Also the presence on many family farms of available houses, cottages or building sites can be a significant help to the stability and economy of many extended or multi-generation households. All that works to prevent fragmentation, rootlessness and isolation, and as such it is to be applauded.

It is important to respect and nurture the political aspect of the farmer's way of life. This is obvious to everyone but only becomes clear when one begins to appreciate the significance of such bodies as the Irish Farmers' Association and Macra na Feirme. The hope must be, as in politics at large, that this aspect of agriculture will remain vigorously alive. To that end, country people need to be educated in articulacy and wise assertiveness from their schooldays onwards. It is not enough to know all one wants to know from the internet. One must be able to discern a path through it and try accordingly to build up the life of the local community in a fast changing world.

## **Farmers' Markets**

French:

France has a longstanding tradition of the Farmers' Market. It is a part of everyday life with a market in alternate towns in an area every day of the week. The idea is that local farmers and craftsmen and women have a constant and reliable market for their produce. An average French farmers' market has a variety of fruit and vegetables, meats, fish, cheeses and other dairy produce, as well as a variety of specialist crafts and even clothing and footwear. The French use the markets as we would our local supermarket and use the "supermarchés" for their less-frequent, bulk purchases for the home. It is a proven successful system and has begun to be adopted in this country in recent years. The Farmers' Market is a consumer-friendly system as well as being producer-friendly. The customers

receive the freshest produce and the producers have an outlet on a local level.

Irish:

The Irish equivalent of the Farmers' Market is not yet a daily occurrence but there are now weekly markets in most areas of the country, not only rural but in the cities as well. Some are long-established such as the Galway city Saturday market which now opens on holidays as well as its regular fixture. Others are only in their infancy but already a popular and successful venture, such as the Wexford Farmers' Market which takes place on Fridays in Wexford town and Saturdays in nearby Enniscorthy. Happily local businesses, far from losing out, have benefited from increased numbers coming "to town" attracted by the market.

Tara Dalton, who is involved with "Irish Village Markets" in Monkstown, Co. Dublin had this to say about the Irish initiative:

"Farmers' Markets play an integral role in the continued development of the farming community in Ireland. Over the past twenty years, with the introduction of the big supermarket chains many small farmers have found themselves being pushed out of the business as prices paid for their goods did not yield a sustainable income.

With the growing popularity of Farmers' Markets in Ireland local producers are being given the opportunity to sell directly to the public, thus cutting out the middle men and seeing a decent return for their hard work. We are also starting to see an increase in organic growing, much of which is thanks to the establishment of the local farmers' markets.

Farmers' Markets offer a wide variety of quality foods and allow consumers the opportunity to buy fresh, healthy, organic food directly from the producers. They give the customer a chance to educate

themselves or ask questions by speaking directly to the producer regarding the food they are buying.”

## **7. The Way Ahead**

It is not the primary task of the church to promote social change for its own sake, but a static view cannot be reconciled with the imperatives of the gospel and the scriptural inheritance already noted. It is not for the church to ‘preach’ new farming practices, but to enable its members to see the significance of new vistas of opportunity. At the same time the church needs always to realise that these things are so pervasive and systemic that many will be left behind. The art is to spot who those people are, as well as encouraging those who are progressing, and thereby to establish local pastoral priorities.

It is not for the church to recommend priorities in business options or ways of life, except so far as those priorities have an impact on the Kingdom of God. Many things said by the church in the past were either unrealistic and naïve in business terms or simply lacking in credibility. There is no point in straying into such territory. Let it be said, rather, that the subjects here reflected upon represent a simple, brief overview of some of the options for the future, as they currently appear. Nothing can be expected to work unless it makes business sense in comparison with the alternatives. Several possibilities would always be limited in scale, so early entry would bring unrivalled advantage. This survey is by no means exhaustive, but is simply intended as a stimulant to local discussion of whatever the relevant possibilities might be. In all cases these things are supplemental to the life and work of an agricultural community. They cannot, in general, replace the mainstream activity of food production and the traditional farmer’s stewardship of the land and the environment. The topics are listed in no particular order.

### Tradition and Heritage:

A particular technology produces not merely the economic result desired but also a wealth of tradition. When that technology is supplanted, much dies with it. The community in question will die unless a concerted effort is made to keep it alive for the education of succeeding generations. Good examples can be found in the maritime and railway heritage sectors. The rich human experience gained through sail and steam, with its vast ramifications in world history, is intelligently presented and kept in people's minds through the heritage businesses in these areas. Much the same can be said of other skills and technologies, not least in agriculture and rural crafts. There should at the very least be a response to the public demand for education and experience, and indeed enjoyment, in this sector. There is much potential: from granite stonework to hurdle-making, from ploughing with horses to making butter and cheese by hand, from the steam threshing mill to the small stationary engines of the early twentieth century.

### Eco-Tourism:

There are those who carefully throw stones uphill every time they walk on an alpine footpath, in order to counteract the degradation that they cannot help causing to a fragile environment. Some indeed go further and think that all tourism everywhere is damaging to the receiving area and its community. Many are thoughtfully trying to act more positively and to promote tourism that is harmful neither to the environment nor to the local community, but rather increases respect and awareness. Rural Ireland is a context with obvious potential for this. The demand certainly exists among many people, and it is a demand that will grow with rising wealth and education. This area is a good illustration of the fact that prosperity can be the ally of good practice and is by no means necessarily its enemy: hang-gliders might be good but quad bikes not. Flexibility of thought is required, not least in the difficult area of access to land.

### Specialist and Organic Foods:

In some places there may be scope to specialise in certain foodstuffs higher up the processing chain than farmers usually deal with. Obvious examples are cheese, ice-cream, yoghurt, and smoked fish. Entry into this limited market will inevitably be risky, but there is solid evidence that it can work. Quality would be a prime consideration, as in the related area of organic production. Here less processing might be required, but not in the area of bottled water, juices and jam. Vegetables, salads soft fruit would require rapid transport rather than processing, but they would be innocent in terms of air-miles. The availability of suitable outlets, like farmers' markets, would be essential. In some cases – such as ice-cream – the primary customer could be wholesale rather than retail.

### Conservation:

As is well known, this is neither preservation nor restoration. It is about heritage and bio-diversity and much more. To promote the stewardship of creation there is nothing more constructive and indeed exciting than to participate in the work of a census of bird species, the collection of oral folklore or the sensitive repair of some fine stonework of the past. Communities and traditions can be reconnected by the conservation of a canal or waterway. Timeless skills can be passed on at the forge or around the fireside in winter, and all will be the richer for the process. It is simple now for many things to be brought into the public domain, thanks to the internet, so the whole activity of conservation can counteract the fragmentation of society and the atomised, individualist lives that all too many lead. The conservation of energy is a different but related matter, leading to many opportunities in new technology and expertise: a tide that should be taken at the full.

## Biomass:

There is no point in building a power station in these islands to run on palm oil, if the cutting down of tropical forest to make way for the new palm plantations causes more damage than the fossil fuel no longer burnt. There is a question of scale and balance at the heart of this. Vast prairies of elephant grass in monoculture would be severely destructive to wildlife and would make food crops such as cereals scarce and expensive. Bio-fuels alone would never be adequate for transport or other fuel. But at the same time they have a huge potential to save the burning of some fossil fuel and to reduce the carbon footprint of the developed world. Used as a blended part of the general fuel supply they have a large future before them and we should salute the pioneer producers in Co. Wexford and elsewhere. We should also remember the potential for waste utilisation in energy generation. This whole matter is a classic example of the need to think globally and act locally. The vast economies of China, India and Latin America will hugely raise global demand for fuel in future. At the same time it is the local rural context that must first be considered by the church in its thought and prayer. This whole area of business is at an early stage in the evolution of both its technology and its regulation. Change and expansion will be rapid.

## Ethanol:

In some ways this is a special case of the general bio-fuel discussion. Bio-ethanol is already big business in the U.S.A. and there is a huge global future, with several plant sources possible and more than one potential end use. The production of ethanol has a special resonance in rural Ireland because of the feasibility of production using former sugar beet plant.

### Crafts:

Here the primary input is labour, with materials neither exotic nor expensive, in comparison with other activities. The craft sector in Ireland is well organised already and its work is in high demand globally amongst those for whom quality and diversity is important. One advantage of craft work is that it is often organised on a small scale. Also it can utilise a wide range of manual, artistic and other skills, so appealing to several sections of the rural community. Much craft work relates directly to other areas of work and enterprise discussed here.

### 'Pride of Place':

Rural Ireland contains many treasures, some regional and some local, some well-known and some surprisingly unknown. There is a good network of voluntary and statutory agencies for grant-aid and other assistance for the promotion of 'pride of place'. Rural people sometimes take their best assets for granted and do not give them the priority that they deserve. A village street can benefit a great deal for coordinated painting or the planting of public spaces, for example. Community employment, under one of the available schemes, can be generated in this way.

### Recreation and Sport:

This is a vast area of activity, remembering that it includes walking, golf and equitation in its many forms. There is scope for many landowners to review their holdings to see whether there is potential for further development.

#### Other Countries:

Farming in Western Europe is highly efficient and because of this a relatively small agricultural industry can support a large number of people. Much of this efficiency comes from inputs of resources such as oil (to power machinery or produce pesticides and fertilisers) and it could be beneficial to look at how poorer countries manage their resources. Many of them are very efficient at recycling and repairing. This is not to be seduced by the Rousseau-esque myth of the “noble savage” living in harmony with nature; the careful husbanding of resources may be due more to scarcity than ideology. Nevertheless there is much we can learn. We could note that highly bred high yielding stock may be less well adapted to local climates and diseases and elaborate machinery requires an infrastructure of repair and maintenance. All this may be relevant as we try to cope with a possible depletion of natural resources.

#### Complementary Medicines:

It may seem a strange subject in the present context, but the promotion of complementary medicine does have a certain relevance, in that it would be both holistic and economical in terms of emissions, while enjoying at least some popular support. The claims of practitioners of traditional Chinese or of Ayurvedic healing may look hollow in view of the health and life expectancy in their own cultures. The successes of Western hygiene and drugs are not illusory, but it is worth considering, for example, the balance of relatively cheap preventive medicine by perhaps less trained practitioners particularly in rural areas as against highly trained and high-technology interventionist modern techniques which require to be highly centralised. We can in addition consider what we can learn in the way of community structures which may be of use in our changing world.

The Eco-Village:

Cloughjordan, Co. Offaly, provides us with an interesting example of what can be achieved by way of coordinated local effort to provide a way of life that is sustainable and environmentally friendly. There is a long way to go before initiatives of this sort become widespread. The eco-congregation movement, which is being pursued ecumenically in many places, could be the nucleus around which a community effort of real substance might develop. In course of time there might be considerable scope for activity of this kind.

A common thread running through these ideas is that of the local project-based approach, through the parish, using volunteers. That is undoubtedly the way to proceed. It is important for the Church to be aware of the needs of rural Ireland and the forces for change; it is vain to try to counter these forces in a negative way. The need is to adapt and to use them to improve both the material and the spiritual lives of those in the countryside.

## **8. Summary and Final Thoughts**

We must each and all be concerned with the great issues of our day: globalisation, world poverty and climate change. Those things affect and inform every decision that we make and which made for us by others. We cannot and should not escape engagement with these things. At the same time we come from the inheritance that we actually have, spiritually and temporally. That inheritance forms and moulds us in far more ways than we realise, most of the time. We come along a well-marked road, laid out in recent decades more by European and world considerations than by local ones. The present has seen seismic changes in rural life, the end of sugar beet processing being a symbol of this rate of change. The future will probably see more change per annum, however measured, than there used to be per decade a century ago. The Church therefore needs to be flexible, thoughtful and well-

informed if it is to fulfil its vocation of prayer and action to serve the Lord and all people.

We are accordingly suggesting that parishes and local communities like schools and colleges, should discuss these things and get to know their local situation even better than they already do. They might work to assist initiatives in the voluntary, cooperative, business and social sectors that respond to new demands in new ways. Much of this is happening anyway, it could be said, but the more we know of our environment, of ourselves, of Europe and of the producers of the global south – for example – the better we shall be at fulfilling our calling as the Church of God in the place where we live.

## **9. Acknowledgements**

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Con Lucey, Chief Economist : Defending European Farming and Food Post 2013, August 2006

Fairtrade Foundation

Newsletters

“The Village”

website for the ‘eco-village’ concept, developed by Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd.

Teagasc – National Renewable Energy Conference 2007

Conference programme and supporting document