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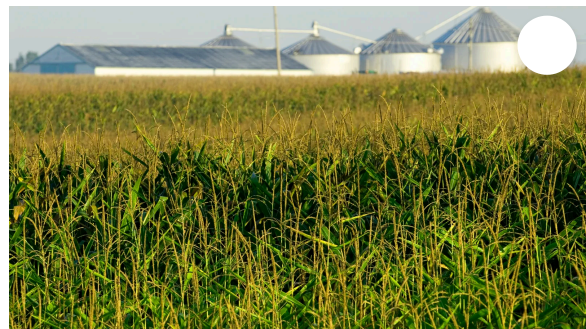
BLOG

EEN IN THE NEWS

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CHRISTIAN VOCATION AND LAND STEWARDSHIP

by Marty Adkins



It is springtime in the Upper Midwest. It is also the Easter season. Our Easter celebrations remind us that through Christ's death and resurrection we are freed from the power of sin and death. And, resting in God's grace through

Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are freed to love and serve God as we love and serve our neighbors.

But who are our neighbors? In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches that our neighbor is anyone we encounter as we journey through life. Those encounters might be direct or indirect, momentary or sustained. Who that neighbor might be is often determined by where we live, what we do and the gifts with which we have been entrusted. Most of those encounters happen as we go about our everyday lives at home, in our communities or at work. Let's focus for now on our work lives.

Each occupation has its own set of issues and opportunities. So, each person has their own set of neighbors in the work environment.

For example, someone that manages a manufacturing business has customers, workers, and perhaps stockholders and people in their community. These people are all walking a common road of life. They are all neighbors to that manager. The Christian who is also a manufacturer has the opportunity to witness to and serve their neighbors in the ways they run their business.

Their customers are served by the quality and price of the products they produce. Their workers are served by how their safety is provided for, the fairness of their compensation, and the dignity with which they are treated. Their stockholders are served as the business is managed with competence and integrity. Their community is served by their

control of pollutants, their tax contributions and their ethical interactions with contractors and suppliers.

And so it goes for every occupation, whether it be store clerk or teacher, laborer or physician, retiree or student. In every case, our everyday work gives us opportunities to live our faith – to model and demonstrate God's love for us. It gives us an opportunity to live out our faith everyday, and find joy in that living. How does this relate to land stewardship? Farmers, ranchers and forest managers have their own sets of neighbors and special opportunities to serve God by serving others. As a former farm boy and someone that worked with farmers for most of my life, I will focus for now on farmers. Farmers, due to the nature of their work and the things they produce, have unique opportunities to impact their neighbors.

In the Midwest, almost everyone is physically close to farming operations and as a result are affected by them. For example, in Iowa nearly everyone lives within a mile of farmland. And *everyone*, even in Des Moines, lives within two miles of farmland. So, depending on the day and the direction wind is blowing, everyone in the state can be affected by dust, chemical applications or livestock odors coming from farms.

Even more people live downstream from farmland. Nutrients and chemicals from water running off fields or flowing from

drainage systems make their way to water supply intakes, reservoirs and fisheries far downstream.

Neighbor-to-neighbor connections don't end there. Farmers have direct business relationships with suppliers, lenders, veterinarians and others. The lands they manage surround their communities visually. Their management decisions largely determine the presence or absence of local wildlife. Their engagement with local institutions, such as churches, are important to the vitality of their communities. And, the care they demonstrate for the land they manage will impact the people – farmers and non-farmers alike – that come after them.

So... who are neighbors for farmers?
People across the fence or road? People downwind? People downstream (even WAY downstream)? Community?
Future land users? All of the above?

Land Stewardship

Every autumn brings stewardship season to churches across the land. But what is stewardship? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care". This definition can apply to money, relationships, positions and other things. It also applies to the land.

The Bible has many things to say about how we relate to the world with regard to land stewardship. Psalm 24:1 says "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;" In

Deuteronomy 10:14 we read “To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.” According to Psalm 90:10, “Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”

The land has been here for a long time. People have not. We are only using it for a relatively short time. In my career working with farmers, I often heard people say, “Leave the land better than when you found it.” What does that mean? In an agricultural context we might focus on the ability of land to produce crops and livestock.

When it comes to agricultural productivity, we might focus on two key indicators: fertility and the ability of soil to infiltrate and hold water. These indicators are largely determined by soil organic matter and soil aggregate stability.

Soil organic matter stores non-water-soluble nutrients and releases those nutrients throughout the growing season for crop growth. Soil organic matter also holds water and keeps it available throughout the growing season. Soil organic matter is largely composed of carbon; one pound of soil organic carbon can hold up to 40 pounds of water.

Soil is composed of individual particles of sand (particles you can see), silt (tiny particles the size of wheat flour), clay (only visible with most powerful microscopes) and organic matter. These individual particles are bound together

into larger aggregates by sticky substances secreted by plant roots and soil fungi.

These aggregates allow for pore spaces to form in the soil, which in turn allow water from rain or snow to soak into the soil. If the aggregates are tightly-bound, or stable, more water can soak into the soil. If the aggregates are weak, the aggregates fall apart when wet, pore spaces plug up, and water runs off. Run-off water takes soil and nutrients with it.

Both soil organic matter and soil aggregate stability can be built-up by:

- Minimizing soil disturbance by using no-till or strip-till,
- Keeping the soil covered using no-till or strip-till and cover crops,
- Keeping living roots growing as long as possible using cover crops or crop rotations that include small grains and forage crops, and
- Maximizing biodiversity using cover crop mixes, crop rotation and integrating livestock.

University Extension services in every state, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and local soil conservation districts can all provide more detailed information on building and maintaining soil organic matter and aggregate stability. These practices are already working for many farmers in diverse landscapes and climates, so farmer-mentors are likely close by for most people.

These same practices contribute to long-term sustainable production of food, fiber, energy, and industrial feed stocks. They also can help provide wildlife habitat, improve water quality on-site and downstream, reduce dust, reduce CO2 emissions, and make for a more beautiful landscape.

In other words, these practices benefit both farmers and their neighbors, whether next-door or a mile down-wind, or a hundred miles downstream, or 100 years in the future. Done with intention and in faith, good land stewardship is a tangible way of honoring God and loving your neighbor.

It's hard sometimes. Farming neighbors are often competitors for land and many non-farming neighbors don't understand farming. Farming can be isolating, especially as farms grow bigger and rural communities shrink. Lenders, landlords and creditors might not share your values. Families are complicated – decision-making in farm families is really complicated.

But we're not alone. And whether it's farming, manufacturing, teaching or something else—it's not just our work. God is at work in the world and invites us to walk along, making use of our gifts and our opportunities to love and serve God by caring for our neighbors.

Martin Adkins is a member of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Knoxville, Iowa where he teaches little kids, serves on the congregation council and helps bake and deliver muffins. Prior to

*retirement, he worked for the USDA
Natural Resources Conservation Service
in a variety of capacities in Iowa. While
traveling with his family, he tests their
patience by pointing out landscape
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