

Overlooking the Land?

One thing we have here in the Red River Basin is land: vast areas of cultivated fields. Seeming to be punctuated by fewer and fewer farmsteads or shelterbelts, the fields themselves look larger each year.

The landscape seems clearly dominated by the land. The very size of the individual fields makes a person wonder whether the widening scale with which we till and plant the land here in the Valley causes our eyes to “overlook” the land – to not really see it.

A recent visitor to Fargo-Moorhead, Rev. Vy Nguyen, a Lutheran Volunteer Corps coordinator and one of the keynotes speakers at Concordia College’s fall Symposium on Climate Change, was so struck by the sight of the Valley land he viewed out of his airplane window that he took pictures of it. The straight, GPS-guided rows in field after field reminded Rev. Vy of the care with tilling and planting that he came to know on the small piece of land in Vietnam on which he was raised. He recalled how the land played a central role in his family, whose stories, passed down from generation to generation, praised the land and the gifts it provided. People would die, children would be born, but the land, the stories promised, would always be there.

Land was not only praised in his childhood culture, it was viewed as a sacred gift. Indeed, Rev. Vy reminded his audience, most cultures refer to the sacred nature of land in their creation stories. Land is seen in these stories as a gift to be stewarded with care and connection. A gift to be overseen – not overlooked.

With climate change looming as a threat to agriculture in many parts of the world, the worry is that farmers will face increasing obstacles, obstacles that could further distance them from the land they seed and harvest. Already, a number of agricultural areas in the world are experiencing more frequent extreme events of drought and flooding. And it appears increasingly certain that most if not all agricultural areas, including our own, will be experiencing similar patterns if CO₂ emissions are not curbed. Even if CO₂ emissions could be curtailed today, agricultural production will be subject to the impact of rising global temperatures for perhaps the next 50 years, or until the current elevated levels of CO₂ decrease.

Might these climatic events, Rev. Vy asks, threaten to distance us even farther from the land we tend?

His perspective brings up questions about our own traditions and practices related to the land. How does land enter the stories we tell in our families, our churches, our communities? To what degree do our stories foster connections between ourselves and the land we tend? How might changes in farming practices change the stories, and how might changes in the stories affect farming practices?

His perspective also asks us to consider how our practices as overseers of the land have immediate – and long-term – impacts on the viability of agricultural lands and production, here at home and in places across the globe.

How can we employ our stories and our practices to engage and live out our connection to the land?

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

