

Caretaking, Community and Land in Uganda

Emmanuel Katongole shares a vision of connection and hope



Feeding the chickens at Bethany Land Institute

Photo credit: Bethany Land institute

Since 2016, I have been working with young people in rural Uganda at Bethany Land Institute (BLI). I founded the BLI programme, together with two priest friends, to address the related problems of poverty, food insecurity and deforestation in rural Uganda. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*; *On Care for our Common Home*¹, provided much of the inspiration behind BLI, and shapes its vision and practice.

In the letter, Pope Francis not only highlights the urgency and depth of the ecological crisis but traces this to a spiritual wound – our inability to see and acknowledge our deep connection with the land: “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth . . .”. He consistently notes how everything is interconnected and that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor belong together. A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach – a practice of “integral ecology” bringing together all dimensions of life: social, spiritual, scientific, economic and political for the healing and care of our common home.

Reading the Pope's letter, I was persuaded that an integral

¹ *Laudato Si'* available at Vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/encyclicals/index.html

ecology cannot be realized merely by technological adjustments and policy decisions (important as these are); it requires a change in mindset, in lifestyle and in spirituality. The need for educational programmes, which can foster a new sense of belonging and a restored relationship with God, neighbour, and earth became clear. Such an education would provide a holistic formation of various “ecological virtues”: care for creation, self-esteem, simplicity of life, sense of beauty, rhythm, gratitude and service for the common good.

With my friends I decided to set up an institute which we called “Bethany” to signify our commitment to the poor. Just as Bethany, the “poor village” of Jesus' friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus was known for its revolutionary hospitality, anointing and resurrection, we hoped that through the Bethany Land Institute programme, poor rural communities in Africa could experience social and ecological renewal.

We decided to call the young people taking part “caretakers” after the story of creation in Genesis 2. Here we meet God as the first caretaker. He not only fashions man (“adam”) from the soil (“adamah”); God plants and tends a garden, and afterwards places man in the garden with the duty to “till and



Alice Nanfuka gives a talk on her farm Photo credit: Bethany Land institute

care for the earth.” (Gen 2:15). Like God, man is invited to be a caretaker. This is mankind’s primary vocation: to care for the earth. But the name “caretaker” also underscores a commitment to healing of the three-fold relationship – with God, with neighbour and the earth, a process reflected in the daily rhythm of manual work, learning, prayer, reflection, community, and rest.

Caretaker trainees spend two years in the BLI programme, at the end of which they return to their villages to serve as teachers and models in their communities. Our hope is that through their leadership, new standards of sustainable creation care, food production and economic well-being will be realized in Africa’s rural communities.

Alice Nanfuka is one such caretaker, who recently graduated from the BLI programme. Now back in her community, she has set up a small regenerative farm at her mother’s house, where she grows vegetables and keeps free-range chickens and two pigs. She practices an integrated “zero waste” system, using the urine and poop from the pigs to make compost for her garden. She often speaks to the students at a nearby school and invites them to her farm, where she teaches them simple principles of regenerative farming.

Recently she spoke to the congregation at her mother’s church, where she shared her story. She did not want to come to BLI; she joined the programme because her mother forced her to. The first few weeks were hard, the timetable was rigorous and working in the garden was not her thing – she never wanted to touch the soil! However, she relates how she stayed because she started to learn how interconnected everything is, and that in taking care of creation, we take care of ourselves. These things were making her happy, and then she discovered that she could actually earn some money from her small farm. She used to be very shy, but now, she told the congregation, she is passionate and wants to share all she has learned.

Stories like that of Alice and other caretakers highlight some aspects of the Christian vocation. In the face of the immensity and urgency of the global ecological crisis, efforts like that of BLI seem so small and inadequate. And yet, they seem to be so crucial. I am reminded of Wendell Berry, the American essayist, poet, farmer and environmental activist, who after many years of environmental advocacy concluded: “The real work of planet-saving will be small, humble, and humbling, and (insofar as it involves love) pleasing and rewarding”.²

Moreover, the efforts that Alice and her fellow caretakers (or anyone of us for that matter) make towards solving the ecological crisis, point to the significance of hope. Hope is not a sentiment or idea, but an experience and a practice. We learn hope through the doing of hope. The care for creation is both a sign and a school of hope. As the first African woman Nobel Laureate and environmentalist Wanghari Maathai noted, “in degrading the environment, we degrade ourselves and all humankind, and in healing the earth we heal ourselves and humanity”.³ In tending a garden and planting a seed, we are sowing within our own lives habits of tenderness, self-esteem, affection, care and love for something (or someone) so fragile.

That is why caretaking, hope, conversion and love all belong together. It requires a conversion in how we think about ourselves, others and creation, a new spirituality involving our sense of connectedness and belonging. But just like love, affection and hope, conversion does not happen in the abstract, but through practical actions in particular places. It is a journey, and like the journey of reconciliation, it is about starting the journey, usually by finding a place, and a form of engagement that reconnect us to God, to one another and to the earth; where one can put down roots and thus learn to love.

It is this ongoing journey of ecological conversion that BLI seeks to encourage and nurture in its young caretakers as we invite them into the programme, and encourage them on the journey using the BLI mantra of “start small, start well, start now.” ■



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² @WendellDaily, March 17th 2017

³ *Replenishing the Earth*, Three Rivers Press, 2010