

New ethic saves S. Africa farm

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We sometimes forget that South Africa is not just an issue, it is people, people who are no better and no worse than us. Each South African, like each one of us, faces daily moral choices.

Let me tell you about the choices made by one of them, a farmer. Roland Kingwill. He comes from the Karoo, an area of hard arid land resembling a semi-desert where it takes five acres of grazing to sustain one sheep.

I first met Roly more than 30 years ago some time after he had decided to tackle three crucial issues in his country — race relations, soil erosion and unemployment. In a new video, "Promise of the Veld," which was shown last week in Lake Oswego, he describes what has happened as a result.

As a nominal Christian, he says, he was confronted with the idea, "God has a plan, you have a part." As he thought about it, a new land ethic began to grow in him, that the soil belongs to God and to future generations. He was exploiting it for his own gain and, in fact, believes that had he continued in the old way the farm would have died.

Was he willing, he asked himself, to put his life entirely under God's direction, not knowing where it would lead? He decided to rise even earlier one morning and to sit quiet and listen. "God," he said, "if you can speak, speak to me now." Immediately, he recalls, he got the clear thought, "You must get going. I have work for you."

Each morning he would take time to discover what that work would be. He knew the place to start was with himself and his farm. He thought about the deterioration of the land. His farm was dependent on a spring. Grass on the upland held the rain-water as it seeped into the earth and emerged as a fountain. If the grass



A DIFFERENT ACCENT
Michael Henderson

were destroyed, the water would rush away and the spring would die. But wool was the main source of income and he was putting all the sheep on the farm he could.

The thought came with startling clarity: "Reduce your stock by one third. Institute a system of rotational grazing." It was, as he said, asking an awful lot. But he was committed to the Christianity of obedience. He sold a third of his stock, and cut his income by a third. The years that followed were difficult. They had to cut out every luxury. But gradually grass began to grow where there had been no grass before. Slowly sheep began to produce more wool per head and the lambing increased. Cattle began to feed where there had been no feed before.

"Our values began to change," he says. "Now our wealth was not in our bank account but in the health of our livestock and the density of our veld cover." New ideas flourished. Scientists and extension officers came to see. When Roly took these radical steps little had been proven in this

field or was even known. He was invited to come and speak and to join the soil conservation committee.

Side by side with this new awareness of the land grew a new awareness of all South Africa's people. "I am deeply conscious," he says, "that I am part of an unjust structure of white privilege. This has got to change. It will change." Roly began with himself. He realized that he expected his workers to be at the kraal gate at sunrise ready to work. They had to obey, with no argument.

In his morning quiet time he thought he should apologize to them for his white arrogance. He hesitated, delayed, thought this was going too far. What would his neighbors say? But he was committed to obedience. So he did it. And discovered very quickly that his dictatorial manner had stifled creativity. His color categorization had put a ceiling on people and what they could do. Each individual on the farm, and how they lived, became important to him.

He improved their housing and, which was quite unheard of at that time, provided a school and paid for teachers. Today farm schools are subsidized and teachers are paid by the government.

Another clear thought in his morning quiet time was to give his staff a sense of security. He had kept the right to instant dismissal. "No one who wants to work will be dismissed," he told them, "even if times get hard." Their homes would be theirs as long as they wanted to stay. "I began to see," he says in the video, "how much pride and convention had walled me off from other races. It was the beginning of a new era. Our lives have been enriched."

When there was drought in the area it was a particularly hard time for the farmers. Then the bankers and economists would come and advise

them to operate with the minimum number of staff and fire the rest. But Roly and his family had decided to put people before profit and also to see what they could do to combat unemployment. His son, David, says, "We feel the right place to start is with the needs of people. Instead of seeing how few we could run the farm with, we decided to operate on the basis of how many we could support on the farm. It's not easy on the pocket, but the result is a happy staff. We have people who are up to fourth generation on the farm."

Between them, members of the family have created employment for the black rural women, training them to do leather and sheepskin work, they're started a weaving industry, and are even exporting their products.

At the end of the video Roly sums up his experience. "I did decide to lay down my right to my life, to do what I want, where I want, how I want. I did not find ease or comfort or prosperity, but a purpose, a deep joy, and a great hope, and I have proved that when man listens, God speaks, when man obeys, God acts. It is not a question of white domination, not black domination, but black and white together listening to the father of us all and walking shoulder to shoulder as sons and daughters of God toward a great future for us all."

In an article earlier this year in a South African paper, Roly Kingwill wrote, "If we have the courage to put right all that is wrong within ourselves and in our nation, this southern tip of Africa will make a lasting and honored contribution to all Africa, and even to the world."

One should not despair about South Africa's future when there are families like the Kingwills at work.

Henderson, a commentator for public radio, writes from his Lake Oswego-area home.