

GLOBAL EARTH WORM

Tackling global and national problems is possible if, like ROLAND KINGWILL, a Graaff-Reinet farmer, you begin the process in your own backyard.

FORTY years ago it seemed to me two great problems menaced our future: soil erosion, which could turn our country into a desert, and racial divisions, which could lead to disaster. In near despair I came face to face with the thought: "If you want an answer to the problems of your nation, the place to start is with yourself and on your own farm."

It was a challenge so clear that either deliberate evasion or effective action had to follow. I decided to act.

On my farm there was both gully and sheet erosion. Although I was trying to contain the dongas the land continued to be damaged. I became convinced that the one way to bring lasting results on this Karroo farm was to reduce drastically the number of animals grazing on the land. I reduced the number of livestock on the farm by one-third.

This I knew would demand both faith and sacrifice, because with less sheep to shear my income would be reduced by at least one-third while interest on the big farm bond and other costs would remain the same. This was before the days of the Conservation Act and manifold scientific grazing experiments. But we followed through our conviction, sold the stock and started a rotational grazing system, something which had not been possible before. We had to adapt to a smaller income and forgo all luxuries.

After five years some improvement could be seen in the veld, and later, because there was more food, each sheep began to produce more wool. But more important we had the satisfaction of a turn in the tide of erosion and grass began to grow where it had not grown before. We had proved that soil erosion was not inevitable and irreversible. We had begun to apply the Land Ethic, aptly described by pioneer American conservationist, Aldo Leopold, when he wrote, "The land is a community . . . to be loved and respected. It is made up of the soil particles, micro-organisms, humus, earthworms — if the balance is lost, erosion follows, the ecology is threatened."

The same conviction that made me begin "in my own backyard" as far as soil erosion was concerned, brought about a transformation in my relationships with people of other races. This had to begin with the men who worked for me on the farm. I had demanded instant obedience from them — no arguments. Early in the morning I would meet them at the kraal gate and tell them what to do, in detail, instructions which I expected them to carry out to the letter. The result was often misunderstandings and rows, sometimes even dismissal. There was, for me, both class and colour division: I took them for



granted.

I found that to bridge the division was quite simple and very difficult. It meant, for me, an early morning apology to my men for past ill temper and dictatorial ways. I told them I wanted to begin on a new basis. They were surprised, but instantly co-operative. We found a new relationship on the farm. I discovered them to be individuals with the same anxieties, hopes, fears and needs as I had.

At our own expense we started the first farm school in the area, and were criticised by neighbours. I began to plan the work on the farm together with the men. Each with a special bent, or interest, was encouraged to use it to the full. We began to discuss and solve their domestic problems. I assured them of security in their jobs, even if times were bad.

My inherited, and accepted, ceiling with people of other races had been demolished. We began to work with welfare and other organisations in our town, and quite naturally invited leaders to our home. New friendships grew.

Later, travelling with a group in Zambia, Zaire, and Burundi, I worked in close fellowship with one of the founders of the ANC Youth League, Dr William Nkomo. He told me they had formed the Youth League because they felt their seniors were too conservative. But now he had decided to walk a new road. Yet he spoke with

courage and clarity: "I will always fight for the rights of my people but I fight with clean hands and a pure heart."

Unknowningly, we had begun to apply the Social Ethic: recognition that the community is interdependent. The boss, the mechanic, the labourer, all must contribute their talents to the common pool; and they must receive their share of the products and conveniences so generated. In this way the community can be healthy, productive and permanent. But if the balance is lost, just as with the land, erosion follows: division, conflict, strikes, family breakdown.

These experiences gave me a new perspective on the needs of our country. I realised the answers were in a dimension beyond economics and politics. This was emphasised for me when a young African, who had been among the radicals, became convinced there was no answer in violence. He is still in touch with many of the young people in the townships and he says, "If they have to choose between the present system and communism they will choose communism."

It is now many years since I made the decision to seek answers to problems in our country. It was a decision of faith, and it has meant at times walking on a lonely road. But with it has grown the certainty that men and women, as individuals, have to choose to apply moral and spiritual values in private and in public if we are effectively to meet the challenge of the age.

I certainly have no reason to feel satisfied — we still have far to go. We have but tried to make changes long overdue on our farm — it seems clear there are changes long overdue in the country.

We cannot outgrow God. But we need to find the way to link the faith so many of us profess with the kind of action that can meet the need of the times. If this fails, materialism of the Right will remain pitted against materialism of the Left. This means in simple terms the continuation of insecurity and conflict.

This need not be. Government and private enterprise have a great part to play, but the lasting solution lies in the hands of individuals. It is time to choose. Neither Capitalism or Socialism are meeting the needs of this age. Structures must be changed, but whatever they may be, they cannot succeed if not accepted by the people, and then built into society.

The answer lies in applying the Social Ethic — caring for people as people. Leadership does not depend on colour or education but on the qualities of integrity, responsibility, unselfishness and courage. Each one must decide, but it is surely "better to light one candle than to curse the darkness".