

My name is Sheri Ellwood, I am a former lutheran pastor and I am the Rural Advocacy Coordinator for KIFA. I also lead our actions regarding climate disruption.

Kansas Interfaith Action or KIFA, is a state-wide, multi-faith, issue advocacy organization.

Though we come from various faiths and denominations we are united around core values which lead us to fight against the four evils (which we borrow in part from Martin Luther King Jr.) economic injustice, discrimination, violence, and climate degradation. These four evils are interwoven into multiple policy areas so that our advocacy as we lobby in the state house and provide community education encompasses a wide variety of issues including health care, public education, housing, voting rights and more. We work with many, many coalition partners. KIFA has official partnerships with the Central States Synod of the ELCA (Lutherans), the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, and the Mercy & Justice Team of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church. Our advocates include congregations and people of many faiths including: Islam, Judaism, Unitarian Universalist, Catholic, Mennonite, Disciples of Christ, Buddhist and more. KIFA is working hard to extend opportunity for civic engagement beyond the state capitol in Topeka and the urban areas surrounding it, through our Small Cities Project and rural outreach with dedicated staff, time and resources in these areas. Because I have lived on farms in Kansas for more than forty of my 51 years and am currently livestock manager on our farm, I am very passionate about rural, ag, and small town issues. I am fighting for rural and non-urban folks to be heard. In KIFA we are working hard for the sake of justice for all people and working for another concept borrowed from Martin Luther King Jr. building the “beloved community.”

The Gospel reads: “Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

The beloved community is a vision, a hope in action, as we work for a time when all people will have food and water, belonging, dignity, health and comfort. Particularly those who we now number as amongst the “least.”

Questions about who should be included in this beloved community have echoed throughout the ages. From Cain’s question in Genesis “am I my brother’s keeper” to “who is my neighbor?” in Luke to recent days when human drawn borders, skin color, wealth, faith expressions and more become attempts at a dividing line. But the answer is always inclusion and an especially emphatic yes to include the most vulnerable amongst us, the least of these. Jesus seeks out the hurting and the vulnerable with healing and world altering love. Continuously shaking up the structures of the world that cause vulnerability. In Luke 4, Jesus describes his purpose as “to preach good news to the poor,

*to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,*

Recently I have had the opportunity to learn from scholars and spiritual leaders from different cultures. These are precious opportunities to see our lives reflected in others, to see misunderstandings and opportunity for conversation, and to gain new insights. One of these opportunities is the book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Potawatomi botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmer.

Kimmer provides a beautiful description of a culture guided by gratitude rather than profit, gratitude for the provisions of the earth, gratitude for gifts from each other. Some of this description sounded familiar to my experience of farm life. Kimmer describes how a gift economy means little goes to waste because to waste a gift would be to disrespect the giver. On the farm we use and reuse whatever we can. As a child I remember the intriguing piles of scrap metal, broken pieces of equipment saved because you never know what broken part can be welded on to another piece of equipment to save the day. Sure much of it waited until time and weather rusted it away, but much was reused as well. I remember helping Dad sharpen mower sickles rather than buying new, holding the vibrating end and knowing metal shavings would be left behind to my endless fascination as these shavings could dance and create furry forms on the end of a magnet. Old paint buckets became grain buckets, worn out skillets became catfood dishes, a tractor tire turned into a strawberry bed. It was just the way we did things and it still is. Recycling, upcycling are called “making due with what you have.”

Kimmer also expressed some points that seemed like a misunderstanding of modern farmers, hinting that we are solely guided by profit. This is not my experience. In my rural advocacy work I often need to provide corrections for this view, reminding others that farmers are motivated by survival, by pride in providing food for the hungry, and by concern for passing on healthy ground to the next generation. Though rural communication styles resist waxing poetic about it, most farmers and rural folk share a love of the land and animals and wide open spaces. After all, no one lives out here for the convenience.

Kimmer’s criticism helped me to clarify rural motivation in my own mind and she helped me to consider our relationship to the earth in a new way as well. We often think about humanity as harming the land but she calls us to consider how humanity benefits creation. When we consider the impact of farming, do we consider the good done beyond food production, the battling of invasive species, the motivation for learning.

As we move toward regenerative agriculture on our farm we have had to invest not only in equipment but also immense amounts of learning. We have learned about the complex web of life with which God has gifted us. The health of the animals depends on the health of the plants which depends on the health of the bees and the soil and the fungi, the protozoa and so on. Regenerative agriculture uses cover crops and rotational grazing so that the byproducts of the plant and animal life regenerate the soil while benefiting the cash crops. The principles of regenerative agriculture are not new. Some farming practices of the past were ill-informed, we didn’t know what we didn’t know, and there are ongoing consequences hence the need for regeneration. But we can also draw from a heritage in farming of diversity of livestock and plant species working interdependently to the benefit of all. The wisdom of the past informs the

technology and scientific knowledge of today to work with the abundance of creation rather than fighting it revealing avenues for caretaking that extend deep into the soil and we find even weeds have something to tell us about soil health. The opportunities to work together with the land and all its occupants are stunning. And yet what works in one place may not work in another, the costs of change cannot be overlooked, and we cannot afford to dismiss the concerns of those who work the land, the financial stresses and the emotional burdens. Prices of inputs go up while farm and small business profits go down. Knowledge and decision making required for success is increasingly complex and accusations fly about who is doing it right. The stresses affect the rest of rural communities. Our churches are shrinking. Our schools are struggling. Too often we are dismissed or misunderstood. And so I advocate with and for rural people.

Today at least 30 congregations across the state are using materials and ideas supplied by KIFA for an Immigration Sabbath to remember another group of people in need of advocacy. I am aware of the irony of leaning heavily on wisdom learned from Native Americans on this day. But it is a delightful irony reminding us that we are all both immigrants and indigenous. Is there anyone here who cannot trace ancestry back to a land far away? If we reach back far enough we all have ancestors indigenous to somewhere.

God's love is never limited by human made boundaries and the scriptures are full of calls to care for the foreigner, the traveler, the stranger amongst us. Yet attacks on immigrants or those who even look like immigrants abound. As I have listened to rural voices I have also heard concerns related to immigrants. Some farms rely heavily on immigrant workers and I learned that whatever the unemployment rate is in our country a percentage of those unemployed are considered not employable for a variety of reasons, if we then consider those who may be employable but unable to handle the physical labor involved in farm work due to age, injury, etc. there are very few left for the work needed on farms. And so farmers turn to immigrants but the complexities and costs of our immigration system leave farmers and immigrants struggling. On top of a complex and broken system now we hear story after story of people harassed, dragged from their homes or places of work, children detained and separated from family on just the suspicion of being an immigrant.

I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Lest we hold any confusion about who should be included as we build the beloved community we need only look to the life of Jesus. In another of my learning opportunities, Rev. Dr. Randy Woodley pointed out "Jesus didn't talk about roman chariots and aqueducts," instead his parables came from the land and those working it, from sheep and shepherds, vineyards, and orchards, the planting of seeds. From scripture we also know that Jesus spent time as a refugee and immigrant fleeing violence. Jesus didn't crowd into the halls of power but walked amongst those on the fringes of society, the hurting, the outcast, the overlooked and calls us to do the same. This is the path to abundant life and joy which Jesus offers.

Time and again the stories of people rejected by our society break open hard hearts. And when our hearts are broken open, we are set free, free to love, free to be compassionate, free to embrace our humanity, free to face the world with eyes wide open and stand in solidarity with the hurting. Free to confront the unjust structures of our world, to engage in non-partisan, values based civic engagement for the sake of all.

No boundaries can shrink the love of God to exclude people. In the midst of agricultural ground, surrounded by the gifts of God's creation we learn of the connectedness of all. Whether the current moment finds us defined as immigrant, naturalized, indigenous, or resists definition all together, we are children of God beloved and cherished, part of the beloved community. Rural folks have much to offer and much in common with other overlooked, misunderstood, and vulnerable people. This is where Jesus stands, where the spirit moves, in the overlooked places amongst the hurting.

Yet our world wants to tell us the only way to be right, to be faithful, is by pointing fingers of blame at someone else who is hurting. One of the saddest things to me is people who are trapped in hard heartedness because the world tells them it is the only right way to be a person of faith. The life of Jesus proclaims it does not have to be that way. We have a generous God who wants us to have life and have it abundantly. We are free to love.

People of faith have much to offer in these troubled times. We are people of hope who believe truth matters. Jesus has set before us a vision and a promise of a better world and God has gifted us with science and our minds and imagination so that we can see how to move our world closer to the beloved community.

Together we seek out the vulnerable, listen and tell our own stories. We stand in solidarity with those who are hurting and move closer to the promises of our generous God, the promise of abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.