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Is "More With Less" Enough?

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Longacre, Doris Janzen, *More-with-Less Cookbook* (Herald Press, 1976, updated ed. 2011).

Longacre, Doris Janzen, *Living More With Less* (updated ed., Herald Press, 2010).

The *More-with-Less Cookbook* and its sequel *Living More with Less*, both by Doris Janzen Longacre, are early contributions to what would come to be known as the green movement. Each book seeks to address the question of how a Christian can live out the Gospel integrally in affluent Western societies when so many in the world are suffering deprivations of basic necessities. 35 years ago, Doris Janzen Longacre began engaging this question when the Mennonite Central Committee [MCC] asked its constituency to evaluate its lifestyle, especially regarding the consumption of food. The books are an attempt to develop a Christian response from within the Anabaptist tradition to the crises around food and energy supplies, especially their unequal distribution, coupled with the West's overconsumption of them. Summed up, they are an exhortation to experience "more" of reality by using "less" of natural resources, and a guide to those who experience the "holy frustration" of wanting this but don't know how to do it. *More-with-Less* has been enormously popular and influential, well beyond the confines of the Mennonite denomination. Both books resonate strongly with many who have a sense of malaise in the face of an increasingly technological society, the lack of meaning, and global injustices.

When taking up either of these two books people might think that they have opened an interesting organic cookbook or an exhortation about living more simply and naturally. Not so. In addition to political and economic calls-to-action, well beyond the change of personal cooking and eating habits, it is clear that we are dealing with nothing less than a theology. In *Living More with Less*, Melinda Berry, one of the section contributors, writes:

A leap from the five standards to a theology is really a small step.... A more-with-less theology, then, is the way we verbalize the connections

we make between God's unified presence in the universe and our response to God.... More-with-less theology gives special attention to the ways that economic patterns and systems help or hurt this response to God and all that is around us. (36)

More-with-Less

Longacre's first 'statement' (as she calls it) is a cookbook wherein she attempts to show people how to use foodstuffs that are natural and nutritious, rely on simple, readily available food staples, and use ingredients that do not stress the global environment. The recipes were culled from Mennonite and Brethren periodicals in the 1970's which were then tested by home economists, and finally compiled into book form. It is an excellent resource that could be a substantial addition to any household. (We are on our third copy.) The book deals with the major food categories: 1) Yeast and Quick Breads; 2) Beans, Soybeans and Lentils; 3) Gardening and Preserving, etc. Each of the chapters begins with a thought-provoking essay which helps to re-orient the reader's thinking about that specific category of food in different and sustainable ways. For instance, in the chapter on Meats and Fish, we are encouraged to use less meat by learning to combine smaller quantities of meat with tasteful vegetables. This idea was garnered from the author's stay in Vietnam. It points out that North Americans over-eat protein and that we can easily get our protein from non-animal sources (165). These section-introductions are both practical and challenging to commonly held assumptions.

The cookbook has a real "back-to-the-land" feel to it which includes recipes for making your own soap and sprouting your own sprouts, encouragement to use non-processed foods, suggestions to take up gardening, etc. There are numerous helpful features, such as the "Gather Up The Fragments" section at the end of the chapters which show how to creatively use left-overs; a several-pages long chart that lists foods, their average serving sizes, the calories consumed, and ANDI scores (Aggregate Nutrient Density Index); and helpful conversion tables. In addition, time-saving recipes are clearly marked for busy cooks. Finally, the back index is excellent, enabling one to find recipes easily.

We were thrilled at the help this book gave us in the early years of our marriage—particularly as it helped us not only have good, healthy meals, but also eat more economically. Using *More-with-Less*, we had a sense that we were regaining some control over our relationship with food, and the global environment.

That said, the un-nuanced theme of "taking control," featured only subtly in *More-with-Less*, seemed already to be a willing servant of the very logic which had arguably contributed, at least in part, to the problem that inspired the cookbook in the first place: a distorted relation to nature. Wishing, above all, to address world food shortages, the book lists overpopulation among the three major contributing factors (19). And, lamenting "snail-paced family planning programs" (24), Longacre advocates for "family planning programs around the world" as a solution to world hunger. Joining in what had become the mantra of the time—that children were the reason for global problems—this "cause" is simply taken as fact. (We note here that in

2016, the [United Nations World Food Program](#) stated that the world produces enough food for the world's 7 billion people and that *one third* of all food produced is never consumed.)

Indeed, the MCC has been increasingly moving in a direction which "would probably have perplexed its founders in the 1920s," as the professor of political science [John Redekop](#) noted. In its interest in influencing political outcomes by providing solutions to global problems, above all the world's food crisis, the MCC listed as its number one priority: "broadening and strengthening rural development and family planning programs in developing countries." Tragically, Mennonites take extraordinary measures to ensure that poor countries develop a stringent contraceptive culture. The [MCC Report of 1981](#) states that,

MCC with the government of Bangladesh jointly provided sterilization services to the people in the Saidpur community. The MCC Noakhali Family Planning Project... has the following as its objectives: to achieve a contraception acceptance rate of 33% and a 20% decrease in the prevalence of pregnancy...an extensive field worker and clinic system has been developed. There are a total of 12 female and 12 male field workers. Family planning service delivery continues to be a major part of the project. Oral contraceptives, Emko foam and condoms are delivered to clients at home. Depo-Provera injections are provided at subcenters and mobile clinics. IUDs are inserted at subcenters.

The embrace of contraception by the author can be found more explicitly in her second book where she brings forward two personal witnesses. The first significantly reduces openness to procreation:

Years ago I wanted to have four of my own [children]. But because ours is a different world from that of our parents, my wife and I decided to stop at two. We wanted to use the world's limited resources wisely... every North American baby born claims 25 per cent more of the world's resources than a baby born in India. Since our Christian ideas call us to share equally, our decisions concerning the size of our families are important. (165)

An earlier witness considers intentionally circumventing procreation altogether:

Barb and I decided to adopt children rather than have a biological family. In our world of limited resources, many children exist who are

receiving inadequate care... we believe that having biological children would betray homeless children worldwide... We do not feel all should agree with us. (275–76)[i]

Given the fact that some contraceptives act as abortifacients and are, of course, in every case, a disregard for the natural unity of the unitive and the procreative dimensions of sexual relations, it is difficult to see how these forms of “taking control” offer an integral Christian response to a crisis which, again, was arguably a symptom of the same form of “control”: a perverse relationship to nature itself and a rejection of the will of the Creator. Then too, one wonders if these books aren’t assuming a starting point that dominates much of the environmental movement, but which is not Christian: the idea of two competing spheres which forces a (false) choice between, on the one hand, the stewardship of the natural order or, on the other hand, the procreation of a human being made in the image of God. It is hard not to wonder if the proposed “solution” doesn’t shift the moral energy away from where it is most needed, especially in the West: less consumption of disposable goods.

Thus, while *More-with-Less* does provide challenging commentary on how we think about food and eating, and the use and distribution of resources, one has to wonder why there is such a rigorous embrace of principles that contradict the reverence for the life and the created natural order that Mennonites claim to serve.

Living More with Less

A few years after *More-with-Less*, and having sold nearly 200,000 copies, Doris Longacre thought the time was ripe to “make another statement” (*LMWL*, 19). This time the theme went beyond food issues and attempted to help North American Christians become better stewards of all of God’s resources and, thereby, “live more interdependently with the poor” (21). In both books the idea was that more-with-less meant that “by using less we actually gain more for ourselves” (29). There are five “life standards” by which to judge whether or not one is “living more interdependently with the poor”:

- The first standard of *Living More with Less* is: *do justice*. The concern here is that we never buy or use anything again “without thinking of the poor” (42). *LMWL* sees the interconnection between all people living on the earth—this, of course necessitates a moral response, especially from those living in the West. However, the book warns against simplistic “solutions” and sentiments to a complex issue. Of course *LMWL* is a sequel to a cookbook promoting *individual responses* which “offer a realistic place to start” (43). However, it is also clear that this is not enough. Longacre’s bottom line is that “solutions for their needs [those of the poor and the hungry] will come primarily through economic and political change” (43). And it is clear that for Longacre the desired political change is meant to come from the West, on the assumption that the problems being addressed have been wrought by the West. As one contributor to the book wrote, “superpowers continue to impose their hegemony over other people” (41).

- The second standard is: *learn from the world community*. Here, the 'living-more-with-less' movement is at its best as it takes seriously the life experiences of all people and encourages the sharing of ideas and concerns, especially those coming from poorer countries. As is noted: "Many of the world's poor survived for thousands of years with none of our technology. That feat takes wisdom worth learning about." Unfortunately, though, this section comes across simply as a litany of condemnations against North American lifestyles without due recognition of the advances that the West has contributed, such as life expectancy and general standard of living. Nor does it take into account the fundamental problems in other countries, such as religious and political tensions, lack of hygiene and medicine, etc. Such a critique of American culture needs to be more nuanced and root evils examined along with the positive contributions.
- The third standard is: *nurturing people*, "[n]urturing including all actions that bring others to this full life and growth in the kingdom of God" (61). The contrast Longacre makes here is between *nurture* and *exploitation*. As Wendell Berry understands it, "the standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care" (61).
- The fourth standard is: *cherish the natural order*, which seeks to make us aware of our relationship to creation. The criticism which is rightly made by *LMWL* is that instead of working with nature, we have sought to dominate and exploit it. Longacre writes: "Today we own the machines for full-scale plunder of our environment. For our future we need a modern 'organic technology.' We need a blend between the peasant's ecological skill and our contemporary knowledge of what is possible" (72). This is good advice.
- The fifth standard is: *non-conform freely*. The logic here comes from Paul's admonition in Romans 12: "do not be conformed to this world." Longacre explains the necessity of this non-conforming to the Christian witness: "[The church] must seek for values and norms not shared by society. In short, it will either recover the Christian doctrine of non-conformity or cease to have any authentic Christian voice" (80). Key to this non-conforming for *LMWL* is the need "to appreciate the freedom of not being enslaved to material things" (81). Longacre notes how much we are brainwashed on a daily basis through commercial advertisements which are "equal, if not more powerful than, the political posters and slogans of totalitarian governments" (81). She juxtaposes the choice to become mastered by money and materialism alongside of the choice to live in simplicity which is "a narrow road of self-discipline" (82). One way of combating the insistent demands of modernity to have that which is bigger and better is "building a common life" which is seen as "a solution to personal greed (that) is an old and well-tested practice" (85). As with the other standards, the call to non-conformity is an important and indeed prophetic challenge that needs to be heeded. However, as with the other standards, the critical question becomes *what principles* inform the contents of this standard. What are the criteria for non-conformity? Here, again, we note the MCC's lock-step conformity with one of the most egregious forms of environmental degradation in the very first environment, the womb. Its promotion of sterilization and pharmaceutical birth control is hardly countercultural! Then too, there are other hints at "non-conformist" conformity with the spirit of the age, such as gender-neutral language for "Godself" (90).

Conclusion

As a family, we have used the *More-with-Less Cookbook* for years. A number of its recipes are part of our family culture. (Shoo-fly pie is incredible!) We have composted for years, have a small garden, made and used cloth diapers for all of our children. (That's a real test of commitment to ecology!) My wife has made our own jam, ground wheat berries to make flour to make our own bread. I have done the house carpentry and repairs since we were married, etc. We do this simply because it makes sense to eat good food that is as close to nature as possible, and to care for God's creation in sensible ways. We think such practical things work with the nature God has given us and therefore must be good for both us and for the world. Our family has benefited, therefore, from much of the more-with-less philosophy, including its ideas for living simply, saving energy, and, of course, growing and making food. For this I am thankful. But there are underlying currents—not always explicit—which appear to come from worldviews antithetical to the Biblical one the authors purport to have, the one which assumes competing spheres (natural and human), and which is driven more by emergencies—real and perceived—than by a correct relation to nature, both human and non-human. When the proper relation of man to nature is no longer the criterion of stewardship, then stewardship itself becomes a form of *mastery*.

These two books taken together could almost have been a prophetic challenge to our society. But unfortunately at critical points they simply buy into the zeitgeist of modernity. The cookbook (*More-with-Less*) does this much less so and by itself is worthwhile to have as a food preparation resource on many levels. *Living-More-with-Less*, while providing five excellent (and indeed prophetic) standards of living as developed by Longacre, unfortunately becomes entangled uncritically with modern ideologies. The preface to the new edition of *LMWL* speaks of allowing “the voices from the past and from the present to merge into a great cloud of witnesses” (15). While there is much good in these books, there is also much which only echoes the value of a fallen world, at times pitting itself against life and the created order. These books are full of many witnesses, but about what are they ultimately witnesses of? I would propose that our great need to-day is a return to the Biblical basis of all genuine stewardship: the position of creaturely humility before God who is Father and Creator.

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[i] This witness was only part of the first edition of the cookbook and it was this testimony that alerted us [the reviewer and his wife] early on that there was something seriously wrong with *More-with-Less's* worldview.

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