

## **Partnership with God in Restoring Creation: A Story of Hope**

*by Tony Rinaudo*

### **Testimony of God's Call and Answered Prayers**

#### ***Formative Years***

Growing up in the Ovens Valley in South East Australia, I was surrounded by the beauty of God's creation. My playgrounds were the mountain streams, fertile farms, and rolling hills covered with eucalyptus trees. With this backdrop, three things shaped the person I am today.

The first was disregard for and destruction of creation was the norm. There was widespread clearing of the forests I loved. Pesticides sprayed on crops poisoned the streams that I—and many others—drank from, swam in, and fished from. The destruction was bad enough, but the fact that this behavior in the eyes of most adults was “normal” and unquestioned disturbed me deeply.

The second influence was my strong interest in other countries and world events. As a child I soon learned that other children who happened to be born elsewhere were going to bed hungry, while our farmers used good land to grow tobacco. To me, this was unjust. Society's priorities—putting money and progress above the needs of people and the environment—seemed misplaced.

The third thing that impacted me was my mother's strong faith and teachings from God's word. I learned that there are more important things to life than money (Matt. 6:25-34), that we have a duty of care for those less fortunate than ourselves (Matt. 25:31-46), and that we are to be good stewards of creation (Gen.1:26-28; 2:15; Rev. 11:18).

Angry at the way things were and frustrated at my powerlessness to change anything, I did the one thing I could do—I prayed a child's prayer simply asking God to use me somehow, somewhere to make a difference.

I went onto study agriculture at university but was often plagued by doubts. Who did I think I was? What difference did this country boy think he would make in the world? But God's word gave me a great sense of peace and assurance: “For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Hadn't God already prepared good works for me to do? I did not know all the hows, whats, whens, and wheres of the future, but God did, and that was sufficient.

At university I met my wife to be, Liz Fearon, who had her own sense of call to be a missionary in Africa. At that time, we learned about the evangelical missionary organization, Serving in Mission (SIM). SIM has a holistic approach to ministry, serving God and people through ministering to both spiritual and physical needs.

#### ***Environmental Degradation and Poverty***

After studying Bible and Missions, we were accepted by SIM for service in Niger Republic, an extremely poor country suffering from desertification due to large-scale deforestation and climate change. Arriving in Niger in 1981, I was confronted by a landscape at the brink of ecological collapse, one which was barely able to support life. The land had undergone massive deforestation. Soil fertility was depleted, and people were struggling to survive due to increased frequency and severity of drought in an already harsh environment. The people were poor and regularly experienced hunger. It was common for men to leave home for at least part of the year to supplement their incomes. The scale of environmental destruction

was so vast, the conditions so harsh, and the reluctance of the people to change so great, that I wondered whether it would be possible to have any significant impact at all.

### ***Futile Efforts at Restoration***

Even so, I reasoned that if deforestation was one of the root causes of these problems, then reforestation should go a long way towards solving them. I threw all my energy into the task—reading reforestation documents, consulting experts, and experimenting with different methods and species. Nothing worked in an economically viable or sustainable way. Eighty percent of the trees planted died, and for the most part, the people I was trying to help weren't interested. Many called me the crazy white farmer!

After two and a half years of striving, I felt like a failure and that my efforts were a waste of time and money. I was so discouraged that it would have been very easy to give up and go home. However, I believed that God doesn't make mistakes. I remembered my child's prayer and all the confirmations I'd received along my spiritual journey and reasoned that there must be a solution.

### ***A God Who Renews the Earth***

Niger appeared to reflect the exact opposite of the biblical picture of God's provision and bounty (Ps. 65:9-13). I wondered if God had forgotten Niger. "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence." (2 Pet. 1:3, RSV). Where was the provision of everything we needed for life (our physical needs) and godliness?

The land seemed to be cursed and our efforts were regularly destroyed by a variable assortment of woes — drought, windstorms, insect attacks, and the people themselves. At times I wondered if I needed to simply accept the status quo until Jesus returned. It seemed that due to the Fall, we were condemned to perpetual suffering, to a life of toil and misery, rising temperatures, increased drought, and severe storms.

The consequences of sin are real. Life is hard and fraught with illness, toil, and death. But I believe God is still a God of love and compassion, and even though the earth is under a curse, he still reaches out to us and wishes to bless us. Despite our sin, God is merciful. "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). With the psalmist, I believe "I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living." (Ps. 27:13). That is, I would not have to wait until Jesus returns to see God's blessing in the here and now.

In my devotions I read, "when you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground." (Ps. 104:30). While the idea of God's Spirit renewing the earth caught my attention, the significance didn't dawn on me till later that day. Driving through a barren landscape, my heart was crying out that God would give me the wisdom and ability to restore even this moonscape. I stopped the vehicle on a barren, compacted area that could have served as car park. I wondered if this land could ever be restored. Then, looking down at my feet I saw a tiny germinating plant pushing through a crack in the dry, hard ground and immediately recalled the morning's reading. I realized that God is not only in the business of saving lost souls and healing broken humanity. God is also in the business of renewing and healing his broken creation. With this revelation, I felt a great burden lift—the task of restoring the earth was not my burden alone. This was God's work and I could go to him for guidance, help, and strength.

Not long after this, I was driving a pickup truck and trailer loaded with tree seedlings for the villagers. Knowing full well most trees would die and that the people didn't care, I

was feeling particularly down. I stopped and reduced the air pressure in the tires to prevent getting bogged down in the deep sand. Looking out over the barren landscape it seemed hopeless—I wondered how many years, how many million dollars, how many hundreds of staff it would take to make any meaningful impact. Not having an answer, I turned to God in prayer, asking him to forgive us for destroying the gift of his creation, as a consequence of which people were now hungry, poor, and fearful for the future. I reminded God that he still loved us and asked him to open my eyes, show me what to do, help me.

Looking across the landscape again, a seemingly useless bush caught my attention, and I walked over to take a closer look. As soon as I saw the shape of the leaves, I realized that it wasn't a bush at all. It was a tree that had been cut down and was resprouting from the living stump. I knew that there were millions of such "bushes" in the landscape and now realized they constituted a vast underground forest just waiting to regrow. In that instant everything changed. I was no longer fighting the Sahara Desert; I didn't need a miracle species of tree that could withstand the goats and cutting and drought—everything I needed was literally at my feet—an "underground forest." My approach shifted from being primarily technical (reverse deforestation with tree planting) to tackling spiritual, social, and cultural norms. I reasoned that if it was peoples' false beliefs about the value of trees on their land led to negative attitudes and destructive practices that brought the landscape to the point where it could barely support life, then the real battle was primarily against false beliefs. I knew that if I could convince people that it was in their best interest to work with creation instead of destroying it and that they could build a better future for themselves and their children, restoration would be relatively easy. After all, everything needed for reforestation was literally at their feet!

The technique of growing trees from living stumps and self-sown seed is today called Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR).<sup>1</sup> From 1984, FMNR spread largely from farmer to farmer at an estimated rate of 250 thousand hectares per year for the next twenty years. On-farm tree density increased from four trees per hectare to forty, resulting in some 200 million trees restored across five million hectares of degraded land without planting a single tree.<sup>2</sup> Windspeeds, temperatures, and evaporation rates decreased. Soil fertility increased. As the trees grew, habitats for beneficial predators, such as insect eating birds, lizards, and spiders was created, bringing back greater balance in nature and reducing crop damage from insect pests. Because of improved soil fertility and moisture levels, and a more favorable microclimate, crop yields increased, and in time farmers were able to grow and raise more and different types of crops and livestock. With greater diversity came greater resilience to climatic shocks. More children were able to attend school. The burden on women was reduced as firewood could now be found closer to home.

It is estimated that gross incomes in the immediate project area increased by \$1,000 per household each year.<sup>3</sup> Extrapolating this added income from FMNR to the entire five million hectares implies aggregate income benefits of \$900 million per year,<sup>4</sup> benefiting

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Rinaudo., "FMNR Frequently Asked Questions with Tony Rinaudo," The Climate Action and Resilience Team, World Vision Australia, accessed Jan. 9, 2023, <https://fmnrhub.com.au/frequently-asked-questions/#.Y7tdS3YzZRY>.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Rinaudo et al., "Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration: Community Driven, Low Cost and Scalable Reforestation Approach for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation," abstract, in *Handbook of Climate Change Management*, ed. W. L. Filho, J. Luetz, and D. Ayal (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-3-030-22759-3\\_281-1](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-3-030-22759-3_281-1).

<sup>3</sup> C. Pye-Smith, *The Quiet Revolution: How Niger's Farmers are Re-greening the Parklands of the Sahel*, ICRAF Trees for Change, no. 12 (Nairobi; World Agroforestry Centre, 2013), 20.

<sup>4</sup> J. Sendzimir, C. P. Reij, and P. Magnuszewski, "Rebuilding Resilience in the Sahel: Regreening in the Maradi and Zinder Regions of Niger," *Ecology and Society* 16, no. 3 (2011): 1, <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss3/art1/>.

approximately nine hundred thousand households or four and a half million people. Observations backed by subsequent research showed that increase in millet yields ranged from 49 to 153 percent. Through FMNR Nigerien farmers were producing five hundred thousand more tons of cereal per year than in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, two and a half million people are now more food secure.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, God had not forgotten Niger. He has provided all that is needed for the physical life of its inhabitants. What was missing was a culture of caring for God's creation.

### **Reflection: Why Care?**

What was going through God's and the angels' minds at the time of creation? The "I" in Proverbs 8:30 is wisdom talking in first person, where wisdom is a type or prefigurement of Christ. In effect, Jesus was delighting in mankind and rejoicing in his creation (Prov. 8:30-31). God tells Job that as the earth's foundations were being laid, "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). When you consider that there are "ten thousand times ten thousand" angels (Rev. 5:11), that is, a numberless host, the sound must have been deafening. Clearly, the response in heaven to God's act of creation was not to hold a sedate garden tea party. The picture painted here is more in alignment with the unbridled joy of the end of football season, back slapping and foot stomping all-out victory celebration.

How do God and the angels feel when they look at the state of creation today and see how humanity is trashing it? What is going through their minds? I certainly don't think I would hear any angels shouting for joy! And, where are the people of God in all this? Not only are we all too often silent about the deliberate and both random and systematic destruction God's wonderful creation, for most of us our lifestyle, our profligate waste and toxic pollution, and our investments often support its destruction. Why is it so rare to hear words of righteous anger at the destruction of God's creation coming from our pulpits?

Why should Christians care for God's creation? "Is the health of birds, plants, soil, watersheds, forests, air and the earth's atmosphere too worldly or mundane to merit the attention of faithful disciples? For John Stott, active care for the Earth and all its inhabitants is not a special domain for some believers with an interest in nature, it is integral to the normal life of Christian discipleship. Creation care matters because 'God intends . . . our care of the creation to reflect our love for the Creator.'"<sup>6</sup>

Firstly, Christians should care for creation because creation belongs to God and is important to him. The 2010 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization report, The Cape Town Commitment, contains this statement: "'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.' The earth is the property of the God we claim to love and obey. We care for the earth, most simply, because it belongs to the one whom we call Lord."<sup>7</sup>

That creation is important to God is symbolically suggested in Genesis 1 and 2. The term "God said" occurs nine times. "And God said, 'Let there be light'" (Gen. 1:3); "and God said, 'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water'" (Gen. 1:6), and

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<sup>5</sup> C. Reij, G. Tappan, and M. Smale, "Agroenvironmental Transformation in the Sahel: Another Kind of 'Green Revolution,'" IFPRI Discussion Paper 00914 (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2009), 18; C. Reij, G. Tappan, and M. Smale, "Re-Greening the Sahel: Farmer-Led Innovation in Burkina Faso and Niger," in *Millions Fed: Proven Successes in Agricultural Development*, ed. David J. Spielman and Rajul Pandya-Lorch (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2009), 56; and Babou Ndour, Alioune Sarr, and Abdou Mbaye, "Projets BEYSATOL/SFLEI, Rapport d'Activites," Institut Sénégalais de Recherches Agricoles Centre National de Recherches Agronomiques (ISRA) (unpublished report, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 59, quoted in R. J. Berry with L. S. Meitzner Yoder, *John Stott on Creation Care* (London: IVP, 2021), 1.

<sup>7</sup> "The Cape Town Commitment," Lausanne Movement, accessed Jan. 20, 2023, <https://lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>.

so on. Curiously, Genesis 2:8 says, “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden” (RSV). Why would the God who has the power to speak things into being bother to plant a garden? What is the significance? When you plant a garden it involves all of yourself. You develop a very special relationship with the soil, plants, and animals in your garden. You give and you receive in return. You do not plant a garden and look after it if you don’t care about gardens. Those who don’t care garden begrudgingly, pay someone else to do it, or simply buy their vegetables at the store. This passage suggests to me that if God himself, creator of heaven and earth, thought it important enough to plant a garden, we as his followers at the very least should value and care for his creation. A creation that, post-Fall, is in grave danger of being destroyed unless humans intervene. John Stott writes, “Christian people should surely have been in the vanguard of the movement for environmental responsibility, because of our doctrines of creation and stewardship. Did God make the world? Does he sustain it? Has he committed its resources to our care? His personal concern for his own creation should be sufficient to inspire us to be equally concerned.”<sup>8</sup> Further, in a forward to *The Care of Creation*, Stott writes that “our care of creation will reflect our love of the creator.”<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, knowing that environmental destruction leads to human suffering, we care for creation as an act of love towards our neighbor, and incidentally, towards ourselves, since we are not immune to the impacts of environmental destruction. With the knowledge that through environmental restoration we can reduce hunger, lift people out of poverty, and reduce the risks of environmental disasters, surely it is imperative that Christians be at the forefront of environmental protection and restorative action. Such actions, depending on the context, increase availability and quality of food and water, reduce the likelihood and impact of severe storms, landslides, flood, and drought, and both mitigate against and help people adapt to climate change. People living in proximity to healthy, functioning ecosystems tend to have more livelihood options and are more resilient to climatic shocks and natural disasters. In this light, loving our neighbor as ourselves is inseparable from caring for creation.

Thirdly, in that God deemed all that he made was very good (Gen. 1:31), we care for creation because it is intrinsically good. Creation has value in its own right, apart from economic or functional value. The sheer beauty, intricacy, variety, interconnectedness, and wonder of creation is reason enough to care for it.

Fourthly, and this may be contentious, the earth, albeit a renewed earth, will be our home for eternity. “A balanced biblical understanding recognizes that God’s judgment of all that is fallen, evil and sinful will mean a radical cleansing of the whole creation, but that God’s saving love towards all he has made will eventually lead to the remaking, reshaping and renewal of creation.”<sup>10</sup> Bookless continues, “the ‘new heavens and new earth’ referred to by Peter (2 Pet. 3:13) or the book of Revelation (Rev. 21:1) do not necessarily imply that the current universe is thrown on the scrap heap. Rather, they speak of the renewal of creation. Just as God is into recycling broken, spoiled, messed-up people, and making them into new creations in Christ, so this whole damaged and groaning creation will be made new again.”<sup>11</sup> Just as we care for and maintain our own homes, surely we should take the same level of care for the only planet we know of where life is possible?

## Epilogue

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<sup>8</sup> P. Harris, *Under the Bright Wings* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), 181-82.

<sup>9</sup> R. J. Berry, ed., *The Care of Creation. Focusing Concern and Action* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> D. Bookless, *Planet Wise: Dare to Care for God’s World* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 146.

<sup>11</sup> Bookless, 80.

My first FMNR-related visit to Talensi, Upper East Region of Ghana was in 2009. As in Niger decades earlier, deforestation and climate change were taking their toll. Women were walking up to four hours to collect firewood. The lack of fodder resulted in farmers walking their cattle to distant hills where they were susceptible to theft. Crops were often destroyed, alternately by flood or drought. Winds became strong enough to remove hut rooves. Children weren't in school, and hunger stalked the land. Communities were contemplating abandoning their land for good. After an introductory workshop, communities agreed to trial FMNR on communal land.

I returned two years later to witness the celebrations over what had been achieved. Through adoption of FMNR, women now had fuelwood close at hand, livestock were thriving with plenty of fodder within a short walking distance, the trees were already ameliorating the impacts of both too much and too little rain, wind speeds had dropped, children were back in school, and food production had increased. During the ceremony, the old chief stood and declared that "this gift of FMNR is from the almighty God and therefore, wherever you bring it you bring life and joy." Over the years I've had the privilege of visiting many communities that have transformed their land and their lives. While the regreened landscapes are impressive, the biggest change I see is the restoration of hope in the people themselves. Invariably there is a spontaneous outburst of joy expressed in song, dancing, and clapping. Interestingly, this is very similar to the responses in heaven to the act of creation! Could it be that by partaking in creation stewardship and restoration, we experience a foretaste of heaven on earth?

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What is the individual Christians' responsibility regarding creation care?
2. Does the church give enough attention to creation care in its teaching?
3. Is caring for creation a valid expression of showing our love for God, and for our neighbor?