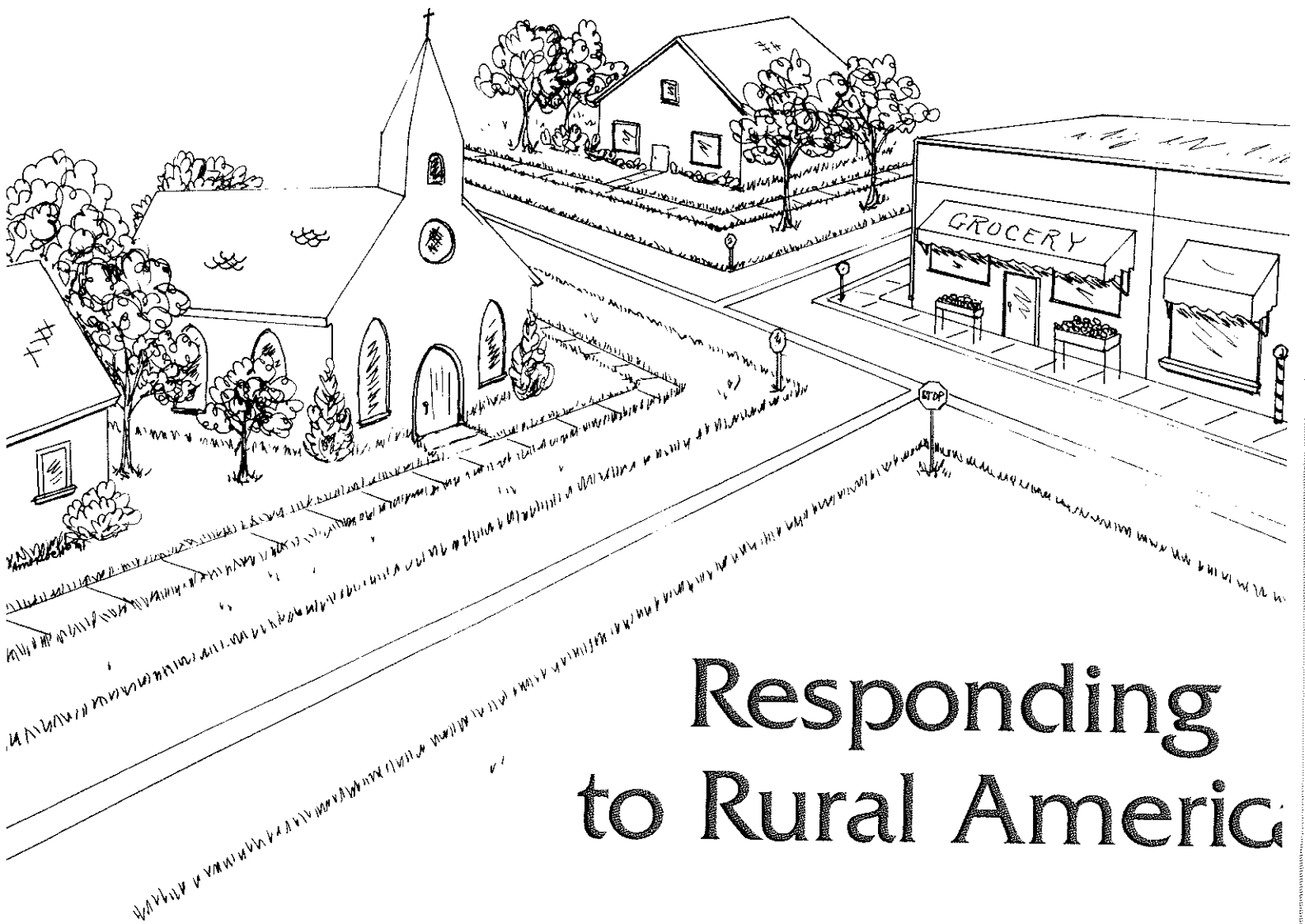


THE CHURCH



Responding to Rural America

A report approved by the 203rd General Assembly (1991), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

**Evangelism and Church Development Ministry Unit
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
June 1991**

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The Church: Responding to Rural America

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The 203rd General Assembly (1991)
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The Church: Responding to Rural America

Introduction

During the past century, the United States has moved from an agrarian society to a nation dominated by metro-urban centers. Understandably, the focus of ministry of the Presbyterian Church has followed urbanization. With each new wave of urban migration, the fabric of rural/small town life has become increasingly threatened until today many rural communities stand on the brink of total collapse. In many cases the church is the only remaining social institution that can form a foundation for the re-emergence of community life.

The history of our denomination's commitment to rural ministry has been mixed at best. However, during the past decade a new focus on rural ministry has begun to emerge in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), partially stimulated by the development of a series of three General Assembly rural strategy papers. The following document contains the two most recent papers, the 1992 report, "The Church: Responding to Rural America" and the 1985 report, "Rural Community in Crisis." Copies of the 1978 report, "Who Will Farm?" are still available through Distribution Management Services of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (DMS 500-85-001, Free).

It is hoped that these three papers can form a basis for the development of concrete rural ministry strategies at all governing body levels.

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Background

Historically the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has expressed appreciation, support and concern for persons living in rural and small town America. Particularly in the past decade, that concern has been expressed through specific General Assembly reports which lifted the visibility of rural issues and raised the consciousness of the church.

The past actions of the General Assembly have focused on the crisis of agriculture in rural America. In 1978, the 190th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted the report "Who Will Farm?" which affirmed the support of the church for agriculture and the family farmer. In 1985, "Rural Community in Crisis: A Report From Rural America" was adopted by the 197th General Assembly and "dedicated to examining the dimensions of this crisis —from the Black small farmer in Alabama to the Carolina Piedmont sharecropper, to the traditional subsistence grit and grub farmers of Appalachia, to the small and middle-sized farmers in the black-soil golden triangle of central Iowa, to small growers toiling in the sun-washed valleys of western America." The report sought to call the church to action in support of those who farm throughout our land.

In 1989, the 201st General Assembly adopted Overture 89-72 from the Presbytery of Susquehanna Valley to reissue the 1985 resolution "Rural Community in Crisis." In addition, the overture asked that the following three areas be addressed:

1. Identify and develop sources for how the church (particular church, presbytery, synod and General Assembly) could address the issues of rural life and rural church ministry
2. Specifically identify some of the ecological dimensions of the rural crisis including sustainable food production
3. Emphasize ecumenical models for dealing with the crisis

Since the reissued report was to deal specifically with the rural and small town church and rural and small town ministry, responsibility for updating the 1985 resolution was given to the Evangelism and Church Development Ministry Unit through its Rural Ministry Support Team.

A writing team was selected, consisting of Jim Cushman, Calvin King, Judy McKay, Mary Noland, Doug Shulse and Wayne Weston.

Conclusions of the Writing Team

As the writers' team approached the task of updating the 1985 report, several factors were clear.

- The 1985 report would not be rewritten.
- The 1991 report would take seriously the General Assembly mandate to focus on the significance of rural and small town churches and identify positive models and approaches for dealing with issues.
- There was a need to define what is meant by "rural." For many, when the term "rural" is used the image of open country farmland and silos comes to mind. The reality is that rural America also includes mining tipples, oil derricks, and lumber mills, as well as villages and county seat towns. For the purpose of this report we will use the term "rural and small town."

- The nature of the rural and small town crisis today is so multidimensional that it is impossible to be reduced to a single report. Although the agricultural issues are still central to the crisis of rural and small town America, many of the issues reach into all geographic regions and into all facets of life.
- The most frightening aspect of the rural crisis today may be the disintegration of community life and the impending death of rural culture. The word “agriculture” is not limited to the concept of farming as an economic enterprise. The term carries the image of a culture of the land. The shift from agriculture to agribusiness is not a mere economic shift in rural America. It may well mark the death of a culture that emerges from the relationship of people with the earth. It is this reality that threatens to destroy rural and small town communities.
- For a number of decades a growing rift has emerged between rural and urban congregations. Churches located in rural and small town and urban areas of economic decline have found themselves in competition for shrinking resources for mission. There is a need to build bridges of understanding within presbyteries between persons in rural and urban areas.
- Racism is a critical problem in rural America. One way it manifests itself is in the cycle of poverty leading to the exploitation of racial ethnic persons where farmers lose land, levels of poverty increase, groups struggle for cultural identity and a “cheap labor” pool sustains rural industries.

Purposes Identified

Based upon these factors, the following purposes were identified for the report:

- To identify for the church the most critical issues common to rural and small town America in 1991
- To recognize the importance of the ministry of small churches in rural and small town communities
- To provide a resource for synods, presbyteries, and rural and small town congregations to develop more effective approaches to rural ministry, including ecumenical models and alternative styles of church development
- To suggest means by which rural and small town churches can become reconciling forces within their community
- To provide an educational resource for study to be used by both rural and urban congregations
- To offer suggestions on how to build bridges between rural and urban congregations and among persons of different racial, economic, social or cultural backgrounds in rural areas

The approach for compiling this report was to go to rural areas in various presbyteries and listen to what people were saying about rural and small town issues and the particular role of church. Since it is impossible within the framework of a General Assembly report to give an in-depth analysis of all of the major issues facing rural and small town America, *this report will not focus on an analysis of issues based upon scientific research. Rather, the report will give a summary analysis of issues and concerns that were raised in the hearings by the participants. In addition, it will highlight approaches and models for dealing with issues.*

Theological Basis for the Church's Ministry in Rural Areas

A theological foundation for the church's ministry begins by identifying certain Biblical themes that find expression in the specific life situations of persons. As one studies scripture, there are several emphases that seem particularly appropriate for ministry in the rural and small town setting.

The theme of God as Creator and human beings as the stewards of creation has special meaning for those who live in the rural context. The care of land is far more than a theological principle. The neglect and destruction of the land has direct long-term consequences for those who, through daily work, know that their sustenance comes from the land.

The story of God blessing, setting aside and giving a particular place to families and tribes also has concrete meaning for those who live and work on the land. The attachment to place is strong for families who for generations have lived on the same section of land. Losing the family place through foreclosure feels like being separated from God's good gift of the land, home, work, identity and life.

The concern over the well-being of neighbor has been part of a natural pattern of rural living. Lending a helping hand to the neighbor in need has been the norm. The massive economic changes in rural areas that have encouraged destructive competition between neighbors threatens to unravel the fabric of rural life.

Community as a gift of God's grace to humanity has also been a traditional assumption of life in rural areas. Persons who live in small towns cherish the experience of knowing neighbor and working together for the common good. As rural and small town communities undergo disintegration, the sense of loss is acute. The New Testament emphasis on God creating the new community is a Biblical theme that can give hope in rural America today.

For the rural and small town church, ministry is connected in a special way with these Biblical themes. They provide a lens through which persons in rural churches view life and the focus of ministry.

A great commission of Christ is "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). This commission is a theological foundation of the church's ministry, whether it is located in city, suburbs, small town or countryside. Persons in a rural and small town church carry out this mission in a particular way.

The church is to be the "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27; Col. 1:18). Because of the relational nature of rural life, the image of the church as the body of Christ is most appropriate for the rural and small town church. Symbolically, the "body of Christ" expresses the unity of Christ with all disciples and the bond that unites all believers with one another. This emphasis lends itself to the need for strengthening ecumenical ties in rural communities.

However, the church is to be the body of Christ in a literal sense as well. The church is to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, the mind of a servant. We know that God is at work in us, both to will and to work for God's good pleasure (Phil. 2:5, 13) Thus, the task of the church is to embody in its life and practice the tasks of Jesus Christ. Justified by God's grace, we are the body of Christ called to develop a Christian life-style.

Therefore, in response to God's grace, we strive to discern and to do God's will. The Holy Spirit empowers the church through its members' abilities to be the body of Christ. How is this given expression in the rural setting?

The Rural Church. Each particular church's ministry and mission differs with its context. It is the task of the local congregation to identify and carry out its particular mission. However, when seen in the light of the Biblical image of the body of Christ, the particular congregation often can best live out its mission in cooperation with other congregations. This report is an effort to discover what general forces are at work in rural communities and how a particular church, working with other congregations, can carry out God's work of saving and renewing rural people and communities.

Worship. Worship is central to the life of the rural church. It provides the context for the gathered community of faith to express thanksgiving to God. In addition, worship is the nurturing center for the church family and provides motivation for the ministries of evangelism, stewardship and mission.

Evangelism. God calls the rural church to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. It is to model the beliefs and the life-style that accompany new life in Christ. Often that will mean living by a different set of values from the rest of its culture. That life-style will be based on gratitude to God for all the gifts of creation, rather than on trying to possess as much as possible. The church proclaims good news of reconciliation in the midst of people's pain and suffering, and invites them to respond to God's grace.

Stewardship. The Christian life results in caring for God's creation. Being a steward of the land that the Creator God still loves and cares for is part of the Christian's life-style. God beckons humankind to enjoy and sustain all of God's bounty. The long-term future of the land falls particularly on the shoulders of rural people.

Community Ministry. The Christian life also results in caring for one's neighbor. That mission is a particularly pressing one for rural communities where people's economic well-being has declined over the past decade. God calls the church to learn what its corporate ministry involves in small towns and counties. That mission ranges from caring for the individuals to promoting the overall well-being of the community.

Our Reformed heritage gives us a model for community ministry. John Knox and the Scottish Reformers believed in returning unemployed or homeless people to their hometown parish to be cared for by the people of the community.

Finally, what stands out as a distinctive emphasis of rural theology is a belief in the real presence of God. God is present with people amid joy, suffering, decline and revitalization. The rural church bases its ministry on a conviction that God is still creating and that new life is occurring in the local community now.

The Hearing Format

Hearing Locations

Between January and August of 1990, rural community hearings were held in Bainbridge, N.Y (Susquehanna Valley); Birmingham, Ala. (Sheppards and Lapsley); Calvin Crest Conference Center, Calif. (San Joaquin); Cheyenne, Wyo. (Box Butte, Denver, Pueblo and Wyoming); Des Moines, Iowa (Des Moines); Houston, Tex. (New Covenant); Kansas City, Mo. (Heartland), Sisseton, S.D. (Dakota); Prestonsburg, Ky. (Transylvania); Salt Lake City, Utah (General Assembly meeting); Tontogany, Ohio (Maumee Valley); and Yakima, Wash. (Central Washington).

The Process Used

A common format was followed in each of the hearings. Participants were divided into small groups to respond to the following questions:

1. What are the key rural community issues in your area? Why are these critical? What are the key factors in each?
2. Are there successful models that have been attempted that address these issues?
3. What are the key issues and needs for the rural and small town church? Is there a special call to the rural church today?
4. What good news and hope does your Christian faith offer in the rural setting?
5. What is the role of the church in helping to deal with rural issues today (local, presbytery, synod, GA)?

As a way of stimulating discussion, several of the hearings had guest panelists reflect on rural community issues prior to the small group discussions. The chart in the appendix summarizes issues identified in each of the hearings.

Common Issues

Participants in most of the hearings identified eight common issues to be addressed by the church. They are as follows: Corporate Agriculture: Landownership and Control; Environment and the Stewardship of Creation; Rural Poverty; Education; Health Care; Rural and Small Town Racism; Alcohol and Drug Abuse; and Disintegration of Rural Community.

A. Corporate Agriculture: Landownership and Control

The issue that generated the strongest responses from participants at several of the rural hearings was landownership and control. Many critical rural concerns are connected with who owns the land. Corporate landownership can adversely affect the tax base, which in turn diminishes local resources for education, health care and other public services. If those who control corporate land holdings live in other regions, responsibility for the consequences of land use is far removed.

Corporate control of private land has long been an issue in mineral-rich Appalachia and other areas where the economy is linked to timber, mining or similar industries. In addition, rural and small town communities in urban fringe areas increasingly are experiencing the challenge and threat of land developers. The most disturbing landownership issue in recent decades has been the emergence of corporate agriculture.

The Shifting Economic Base

In rural America, economic control and concentration in the nineties could impact virtually all aspects of life. Control of the means of production—from land, to breeding stock, to genetic material—is continuously shifting out of the hands of the producers. Contract feeding of livestock is continuing to grow and constitutes the next major change in the structure of agriculture—one in which the farmer becomes a laborer of a corporation.

Moreover, concentration in the meat-packing industry may continue to affect farmers, workers and communities. Already the “big 3” of the meat-packing industry—IBP, ConAgra, and Cargill-Excel—have firm control of 68 percent of cattle slaughter in the United States, 80 percent of the boxed-beef production, and between 30 percent and 40 percent of U.S. hog slaughter.¹

Cargill is the nation’s largest privately held corporation and is a leader in agribusiness. In 1986, one of the worst years of the farm crisis, Cargill realized its highest level of pre-tax profits since 1974. And between 1981 and 1987, ConAgra’s profits rose 513 percent.²

Economic Stratification

As we enter the new decade, it is becoming clearer that the strains of economic stratification that marked the eighties will be heightened in the nineties. Some people fear that the concentration of control over capital and land resources will be intensified; economic and political power will continue to accrue in the hands of fewer interests, and food production and the structure of life in rural America may become a function of distant corporate decision making.

With the increased concentration of corporate farmland, economic stratification has become rooted deeply in the structure of agriculture itself. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, as of 1986:

- 4 percent (95,000) of farms reap 51 percent of total gross sales and farm 24 percent of the farmland in the United States (gross sales exceeding \$250,000)
- 72 percent (1.6 million) of farms reap less than 10 percent of total gross sales and farm about 30 percent of the farmland (gross sales less than \$40,000)³

The Congressional Budget Office stated that in 1995, in spite of increased reliance on off-farm income, total family farm income will drop from \$79.5 billion in 1990 to \$70.3 billion in 1995.⁴

Divisions Within Rural Communities

One consequence of the growing economic stratification in rural America is the emergence of divisions within rural communities and churches. The gulf is widening between the families who are doing well and others who are struggling for survival.

A theme voiced in several hearings was that the rural church must practice reconciliation in deeply divided communities. Discovering practical ways of becoming Christ's reconciling agent may be the greatest challenge confronting the rural and small town church today.

The Response of the Church

Possibly the most effective response the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has made in addressing the issues of corporate agriculture has been through projects supported by the Presbyterian Hunger Program and the Self-Development of People programs. In addition, numerous community organization projects such as Prairiefire Rural Action of Des Moines, Iowa, and the Western Organization of Resource Councils with member councils in Montana and North and South Dakota have developed multifaceted approaches to confronting rural issues.

B. Environment and the Stewardship of Creation

It quickly became apparent in the rural hearings that the environment is a critical issue to the people who worship, live and work in rural America. A variety of issues surfaced during the hearings. These issues included acid rain, clear cutting of old growth forests, sustainable agriculture and water pollution. For a more in-depth analysis of environmental concerns, we strongly commend the 1990 General Assembly report, "Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice."⁵

Stewardship of the Land: Sustainable Agriculture

In several hearings, the issue of sustainable agriculture was raised. American family farmers are struggling to discover an appropriate balance between economic viability and sustainability. Farm families are faced with the dilemma of payments being due while trying to preserve the land for future generations. Sustainable agriculture may be one answer to these problems.

Sustainable agriculture can be defined as an approach to agriculture that works in concert with the natural processes of the ecological system. Rather than trying to overpower nature with chemicals and machinery, it seeks to cooperate with plants and animals, sunlight and rain. Sustainable agriculture accepts creation as it is, including the weeds and the insects, and takes into account the lay of the land.

Farm families in a sustainable system are caregivers of creation. Ordinarily, as stewards of the land farmers are well equipped to determine what type of sustainable agriculture will work on their land. Farmers should be encouraged to develop their own sustainable system.

Chemicals have been a key ingredient in increased agricultural productivity for American farmers for several generations. The majority of farmers, large and small, still depends upon chemicals to ensure the economic viability of the farm. On the other hand, chemicals, if not used properly, can be a danger to those who work on farms, as well as contaminate food and water supplies.

Because farmers live close to the land, they understand what possible impact today's actions may have on future generations. All of us need to become informed on issues of sustainable agriculture, and to consider life-style changes that will support such earth-saving methods.

Stewardship of Natural Resources

God has provided an earth with a bounty of resources for the good of humanity. At the same time, God has called us to be stewards of the planet to protect the earth's resources for future generations.

One of the most debilitating effects of the struggle for a safer and cleaner environment in rural areas has been the rancor and deep divisions created between persons. Preserving the environment is a costly enterprise. All too often working people are expected to bear most of the burden. Environmental controls frequently result in job loss and economic dislocation of thousands of persons. Corporations affected by environmental controls sometimes threaten to eliminate the industry rather than implement environmentally sound practices. Persons in rural communities are forced to choose between the environment and economic survival. Divisions among rival groups quickly emerge.

- Mining—Rural America has dealt with the adverse affects of extractive industries for generations. In the mining industries short-term profits have often led to controversial practices with long-term consequences. In the 1970s, federal and state laws controlling mining practices lessened the impact. However, in some areas lax enforcement of regulations has greatly diminished reclamation efforts.
- Forestry—Forests are viewed by the lumber industry as a renewable resource. The rural recreation industry exists in tension with the view that timber is a crop. Trees are a haven of retreat from urban living. Rural residents are caught in the vortex of these competing forces.

Forestry practices have at times caused damage to the environment and depleted this resource. We are all involved in this dilemma. As Jolene Unsoeld, congresswoman for the state of Washington, stated: "It is the accumulated actions of all of us who admire a beautiful wood-paneled wall, environmentalists who want their grandchildren to know the ancient forests and those of us who come from generations of hard-working, hard-living loggers. We are all at fault because all of us wanted the days of abundance to go on forever, but we didn't plan and we didn't manage for that end."

- Water—The issue of water also critically impacts rural America. Water rights controversies divide rural residents, communities and states. States along the Missouri river basin battle over the control of the flow of the river. Chemicals from pesticides have been found in ground water in 26 states, while many rural Americans still get their primary water supplies from wells. Mine drainage has contaminated community water supplies. The expanding water needs of urban areas drain water needed for farm irrigation. Hydrologists estimate that the vast Ogallala aquifer that stretches from southern South Dakota to northwest Texas is being drastically depleted. The complexity and extent of issues surrounding water usage and pollution indicate that a monumental effort is needed to address this critical concern.
- Waste Disposal—Recently garbage and hazardous waste disposal has emerged an issue of critical importance in rural areas. Cities, corporations and the federal government are searching for new dump sites as current landfills reach capacity. Some rural areas are literally becoming the dump sites of society.

The Response of the Church

The church has a critical role in addressing each of these environmental concerns. First, churches have the essential role of encouraging members to reflect Biblically and theologically about environmental issues.

Second, it is important that churches clearly recognize that environmental decay is the responsibility of all persons and not just industry. The consumptive life-styles of individuals and families lie at the foundation of most environmental abuses.

In addition, churches need to become reconciling agents in communities facing difficult environmental issues. Churches could bring together opposing groups to build bridges and explore mutually beneficial approaches for protecting the environment.

In summary, the 1990 General Assembly report on restoring creation points out additional ways that the church can appropriately respond to the environmental crisis. We particularly urge local congregations to take seriously the suggestions and recommendations included in that report.

3. Rural Poverty

With the increased economic stratification in rural America, the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is widening. The number of those on the low end of the economic scale has grown dramatically in the past decade.

Rural Poverty Statistics

The massive upward redistribution of wealth and power through public policy in the eighties is only now being understood. According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, census data show that the income gap between rich and poor families was wider in 1988 than in any year since the Census Bureau began collecting this data. The Center found that the richest 20 percent of all families in the United States received 44 percent of the national family income, the largest share recorded since the Census Bureau began collecting such data in 1947.⁶

Rural America has been deeply affected by the process of economic stratification. During the eighties, rural poverty rose to levels that, for the first time ever, rivaled the poverty rate in America’s inner cities. By 1986, the rural poverty rate was 18 percent. Fifty-seven percent of the nearly 1.8 million Black children in the rural South were living in poverty in 1986, and by 1987, 25 percent of rural children of all races were poor.⁷

Moreover, as of March 1987 the poverty rate for those rural persons who remained on farms stood at 19.6 percent, compared to 13.4 percent for nonfarm residents. In Iowa, the state education department reported that the 10 poorest counties in the state in 1986—all with poverty rates of over 20 percent—were rural.⁸

The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities reports that in 1987, only 11 percent of rural households had incomes that placed them in the most affluent fifth of American households. Conversely, 26 percent of all rural households had incomes placing them among the poorest fifth of U.S. households, while 18 percent of urban households had incomes this low.⁹

Results of Rural Poverty

The most persistent poverty pockets, the Appalachian coal fields, the Deep South, parts of the Southwest and Native American reservations, have been joined by spreading poverty in the Midwest. Malnutrition, hunger and inadequate housing are signs of this growing condition.

Rising illegitimate birth rates and family disintegration lock rural women into cycles of poverty. Single mothers dominate U.S. poverty statistics. The poverty rate is highest among minority households headed by nonelderly women living in rural areas. Sixty-five percent of rural Blacks and Hispanics are below the official poverty line. Numerically, the largest group of poor in rural America are white.

Many rural poor receive no cash assistance, do not live in public housing, do not receive food stamps and are not covered by Medicaid. Rural residents are more likely to be underemployed rather than on welfare.

The farm crisis, with its lowered farm income, added a new dimension to rural poverty. Farm women left their traditional role of working beside their husbands to obtain employment in off-the-farm jobs. The resulting lack of disposable income has affected small rural businesses and business failures have resulted.

Homelessness

Homelessness is the mirror that reflects the extent and depth of poverty in rural America. Rural homeless people live in cars, barns, chicken coops and even under trees. They double and triple up with families and friends. Those labeled quasi-homeless live in substandard housing with roofs that leak, faulty plumbing and rodent infestation, while paying a large portion of their income for rent.

Four factors impact the low-income housing crisis: private market rent has dramatically risen, availability of low income housing has steadily decreased, funding for subsidized housing has been eliminated and utility costs have skyrocketed.

Because houses cannot be built quickly or moved where they are most needed, housing problems are among the toughest of those faced by the poor. They are particularly difficult for the rural poor, the least visible among the "have-nots" of the nation.

Rural homelessness is tied to the economic system. Contributing factors include the slump in the timber, agriculture, mining, meat and energy industries; the loss of manufacturing jobs; farm foreclosures and the ripple effect on Main Street. Many rural people, who four or five years ago were middle-class citizens, are now chronically underemployed.

The Response of the Church

Rural families are finding innovative ways to overcome their many problems. Churches are addressing the causes and effects of rural poverty in a wide variety of ways. The Presbyterian Hunger Program and Self-Development of People programs have been important sources of seed money in supporting various direct service, education and community development programs.

The rural poor contend with problems and issues indigenous to the particular region. However, they also share much in common. They cope with malnutrition and inadequate housing and health care, with the resulting feelings of hopelessness and despair. It is the calling of each particular church to discover new ways to meet the needs of those who daily contend with poverty. One significant need, among many, is the need to provide comprehensive child care within rural communities.

D. Education

A common issue of great concern for those who live in rural areas is public education. For years the school was one of the institutions that tied community life together. The decline and loss of the small town school has had a devastating effect upon rural community life in general.

Causative Factors

The closing and consolidation of local schools has made education much less accessible to students, and often there has been no noticeable increase in the quality of education.

A major factor contributing to the decline of education in rural areas has been an inadequate financial base. In areas of Appalachia in which corporations control vast land holdings, the tax base has traditionally been kept extremely low. This has prevented communities from having an adequate financial base for public education. In recent years, the education systems of both West Virginia and Kentucky have been declared unconstitutional because of the extreme inequities between rural and urban school systems.

In the farm belt, the shortage of available jobs has stimulated an exodus from rural areas. This loss of population has caused rural schools to lose the tax base that keeps schools open and rural communities thriving.

Politics in the education system and stringent rules and regulations hamper the work of rural school administrators. Increased technology has forced schools to add variety to school curricula, increasing the need for more teachers and equipment. This has produced an added financial strain on small town schools and led to increased consolidation and closings.

The Response of the Church

In several hearings, the positive role of the Presbyterian Church in supporting rural public education was highlighted. For a number of decades, the Presbyterian Church sponsored mission schools in rural areas. This was particularly true for mountain children in Appalachia and Black children in the South. In the past fifty years, the emphasis has shifted to support of public education, and many church-related elementary and secondary schools have been closed.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to be involved in education issues in rural areas. Numerous churches sponsor tutoring and other education enhancement programs. The establishment of the Boggs Rural Life Center in Georgia offers the potential for developing additional education enhancement programs in that region of the country.

E. Health Care

Two major demographic trends in remote rural areas that will play a definitive role in shaping the future delivery of health-care services in rural areas are that the population is becoming smaller and that it is growing older.

Issues of Health Care

A smaller rural population has meant a cutback in health-care services, while a population increase of senior citizens is intensifying the need. Again, the issue involves both the accessibility to and quality of health care.

A growing number of rural communities are threatened by the possible closure of small hospitals and clinics. It is becoming increasingly difficult for small towns to attract and keep medical personnel. The situation has been compounded by the increased debt load of doctors and clinics brought on by the growing number of uninsured and underinsured patients. The rising cost of health insurance has forced many rural families to decrease or drop coverage, and the increased cost of health care has become a financial burden.

Accessibility of health-care services is greatly compounded in rural western states. The closing of a local hospital or clinic can mean that residents have to drive two or three hundred miles to receive health care. This places an extreme burden on the families of the hospitalized person as they are forced to find lodging in order to be close to the ill family member.

The Response of the Church

One example of the church's positive involvement in health-care concerns is the Mobile Health Fair program of the Synod of the Covenant. Each summer several week-long health fairs that provide free diagnostic service are sponsored in rural regions of the synod. Parish nursing programs and wellness clinics are additional successful approaches to rural health care. Churches need to assess their facilities for the provision of recreational programs that will contribute to holistic health care for people in rural communities.

F. Rural and Small Town Racism

Racism is part of the fabric of life in many rural and small town areas. It is inseparably linked to the economic system of particular regions of the country. It is visibly expressed among migrant workers, minority farmers and emerging small town industrial enterprises such as meat-packing.

In addition, the rise of white supremacist groups such as the Skinheads, the White Separatist Party and the Ku Klux Klan in western states have created new concerns about overt racism and violence. There has been a dramatic increase in crimes of violence in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming in recent years. Many of those violent crimes have been directed at racial ethnic minority persons.¹⁰

The issues of rural racism are extremely complex and cannot be fully explored in the context of this report. However, the following is a summary of issues related to particular racial ethnic minority groups that were identified in some of the hearings.

Issues for Racial Ethnic Minorities

Black Minority Farmers

One of the most visible results of racism in rural and small town areas has been the disproportionate loss of farmland by Black farmers who are losing their land at a rate three times that of white farmers.

Since 1920, 85 percent of all land owned by Blacks has been lost. In 1920, there were more than a million Black people engaged in agricultural production, owning over 15 million acres of land. By 1960 the Black land base had decreased to less than 6 million acres. The 1977 Agriculture Census showed 57,000 Black farm owners and operators with 3.7 million acres. The most recent 1987 census shows 23,000 Black farm owners and operators with 2.2 million acres.¹¹

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund estimates that Black land loss is at a rate of 1,000 acres per week, and that by the mid-nineties Blacks may be virtually a landless people in America. According to the Federation, a major contributing factor to the loss of Black farms has been discrimination in the utilization of Farm Home Administration programs and other policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.¹²

The most positive change in public policy that is helping to redress the situation is the enactment of the Minority Farmers Rights Act that was drafted by farmers. This act is aimed at providing the necessary resources to restore the dwindling land base of minority farmers and build stronger communities.

A number of community organization groups have effectively been involved in advocating rights for Black farmers. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund and its associate organization, The Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation, were directly involved in the enactment of the Minority Farmers Rights Act of 1990.

Hispanic Migrant Workers

Migrant farm workers are the poorest working group in the United States today and are discriminated against racially, economically and culturally. In addition to extremely low wages, farm workers are faced with substandard housing, severe medical problems and inadequate education. Health issues are critical. Farm workers are frequently victims of pesticide poisonings. Poor sanitary conditions persist and legal safeguards are unequal. For instance, if a single construction worker is on a job site, toilet and washing facilities must be provided. However, federal law provides that such facilities must be provided for farm workers only when there are eleven or more workers. Many cases of discrimination are never reported for fear of job loss.

Feelings of racism are strongly felt by farm workers in areas where migrant work is common. Jose Louis Fernandez, outreach director for Beth-El Farm Workers, says, "If I or another farm worker go into a place of business, they do not address us as 'sir' or treat us with the same respect as a regular American. You feel like a second-class citizen. Farm workers deserve the same dignity as others."

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) supports a number of migrant ministry projects throughout the country. As an example, the Beth-El Farm Worker Ministry, Inc. is a joint ministry project of three presbyteries in Florida. Beth-El is a holistic ministry to migrant farm workers and the rural poor that emphasizes compassion ministries (food, clothing, emergency assistance for rent and medical care), worship, education programs, housing, self-development projects, community organizing and advocacy.

Asians in Rural Areas

The nature of racism related to Asians in rural areas has two primary foci. The first is the continuing difficulties faced by Japanese farmers, particularly in California. The second relates to the growing migration of Asians to rural and small town areas in response to the development of new industries.

Before World War II, 45 percent of the Japanese Americans in Washington, Oregon and California were engaged in growing and another 18 percent in other farm-related work. Even with the internment and forced relocation of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, Japanese farmers still maintain an important presence in Northern California today.¹³

In general, Japanese Americans face the same economic turmoil as family farmers in other regions of the country. Although racism is not as intense as in the past, some racist attitudes among whites do persist and compound the difficulties of economic survival.

A fairly recent phenomenon that has heightened racism against Asians has been the location of new industries in some rural and small town areas. In some cases, such as the growth of meat-packing plants in the farm belt, immigrant Asian workers have formed a new cheap labor pool. Not only do the workers often receive low wages, but they also suffer from overt discrimination. Hostilities often surface in traditionally homogeneous communities that move through a transition to a more culturally plural community.

Some Asian-owned industries are beginning to locate in rural and small town communities to take advantage of a low tax base and cheaper labor pool. Although residents are usually happy for the new economic opportunities, cultural misunderstandings often add to racist feelings.

Rural and small town churches in such settings face opportunities and challenges to develop ministries that foster cultural understanding and reconciliation.

Native Americans in Rural Areas

Native Americans often feel they are the most forgotten people of all. Although coming from diverse tribal nations, there is a common cultural tie that binds them to the land. They resist being identified with racial ethnic minority groups that have immigrated to this country, as they are the original inhabitants. The poverty level of Native Americans on reservation land is extreme.

In general, Native Americans from all tribal nations still struggle with the negative effects of cultural assimilation. In the past, there have been efforts to suppress the culture of certain tribal groups, including religious rituals. As a result, numerous Native Americans have struggled to maintain their sense of tribal identity and personal integrity. This struggle has contributed to the unusually high incidence of alcoholism. In recent years, fetal alcohol syndrome has emerged as a serious problem.

In addition, today there are a number of specific concerns that relate to treaty rights violations. There is pressure to use reservation land for mining and refuse dumps. Fishing rights of several tribal nations from Wisconsin to Washington state are being contested by various groups. There are continuing water-rights controversies related to reservation lands that have pitted certain tribal groups against ranchers in the Northwest.

The challenges faced by particular Native American congregations are immense. The vast majority of congregations are small and have limited resources. At the Dakota hearing, the participants raised concerns that Native American churches need to become more involved in social and community ministries. In addition, increased dialogue between Indian and non-Indian churches is extremely important. Stronger ties also need to be developed between the denomination and its Native American churches.

The Response of the Church

Racism operates at numerous levels in rural and small town America. The rural and small town church has the difficult yet challenging mission of confronting racism in the particular community context and developing ministries to build bridges of understanding and reconciliation.

In addition, the presbytery, synod and General Assembly must continue to focus resources on ministries that foster justice and better racial understandings. New efforts must be undertaken to develop new congregations and ministries among racial ethnic minority persons in rural areas. Increased efforts are needed to identify, recruit and educate pastoral and lay leadership for racial ethnic minority congregations and ministries. The most effective lay pastor programs have been created in Native American parishes. The Choctaw Larger Parish, in cooperation with Charles Cook Theological School in Tempe, Arizona, has developed a lay pastor training program that is a model for the denomination. The Presbyterian Hunger Program and the Self-Development of People programs should be encouraged in their support of development and empowerment efforts in racial ethnic communities.

G. Alcohol and Drug Abuse

In the past, the isolation of living in rural areas contributed to alcoholism. In recent decades increased poverty and the availability of illegal drugs have greatly complicated the problem. Alcohol and drug abuse has often resulted in family violence.

The Cycle of Violence

One result of economic collapse in rural America is an increase in spouse and child abuse and suicide. The frustration, the loss of personal esteem and the despair that result from unemployment or a farm foreclosure often lead persons to the escapism of drugs and alcohol. As poverty deepens, the cycle of drug abuse and family violence heightens.

Illegal Drug Distribution

An emerging issue mentioned in several of the hearings is the growing trend of particular rural and small town areas becoming distribution centers for illegal drugs. In addition, growth and manufacturing of drugs have risen sharply in rural areas. Marijuana has become a significant cash crop in some states.

Conditions that make illegal drug manufacturing and distribution feasible include weak local law enforcement and easy access to an urban center.

The Response of the Church

Churches in a number of rural and small town areas have begun to cooperate in developing alcohol and drug counseling centers and shelters for abused women and children. Presbyterian Hunger Program funds have been used to support numerous such projects, which also attempt to address the deeper causes of poverty. Some of the most effective programs to address alcohol and drug abuse are developed and carried out through Native American ministry projects.

The Ministry of Presence

One response is to be there as the church. Not only do existing congregations need to be supported and renewed but new ministries of presence can be established as well. The ministries must build ecumenical cooperation where possible and be focused upon supporting and rebuilding community life in all of its facets.

The Theological Task

Second, the rural and small town church has an essential theological task of proclaiming and modeling a theology of hope in the midst of conditions of decline.

Evangelistic Outreach

Many persons in rural and small town communities continue to exist outside the church and stand in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The rural and small town church has a particular responsibility to share the good news by becoming directly involved in ministering to the total needs of persons.

Ecumenical Church and Community Centers

One practical model for rural, small town ministry could be the establishment of ecumenical "Church and Community Centers." Such centers could develop ministries of worship, community celebration, Biblical reflection on issues, reconciliation among groups and programs for service and justice. An essential element of such a model would be to build approaches to team ministry in which pastors and church workers are trained with laypersons to work as ministry teams. Various forms of cooperative parish ministry could become the context for such team ministries.

Many rural and small town communities are indeed in the midst of decline and disintegration. God is calling the church at all levels to continue to respond in new ways to create ministries that will begin to build God's new creation in rural America today.

Concerns for Rural Ministry

A. Pastoral Leadership

If the rural and small town church is to respond in a positive way to the issues facing rural communities by developing ministries aimed at rebuilding community, then the quality and nature of pastoral leadership is of critical concern.

Rural ministry calls for pastors, church workers and laity to be community leaders. For the past several decades, the clergy professional model of pastoral leadership has emerged as the norm. The pastor's role is to work with the committee structure of the church to build a healthy, program-oriented church organization.

This approach to ministry has seldom worked well in rural and small town churches, and in light of the needs of rural churches and communities today, it remains inappropriate. Pastors are needed who understand community, possess basic community organization skills, place a priority on building personal relationships and are open to working ecumenically.

The rural and small town pastor also needs to possess a positive vision of the particular church's mission. Rural ministers are often faced with a corporate pessimism which counters Christian hope. Pastors need to be able to articulate a theology of hope and lead the people of the church toward a positive vision of mission.

The effective rural and small town pastor will work with the laity to build a theology of rural life. In addition, the rural pastor needs to build team ministry with the laity and provide necessary resources.

Finally, in order to build effective ministry, the rural and small town church must have pastors who resist the attraction of upward mobility, possess a clear calling to rural and small town ministry and are willing to commit at least five to ten years to ministry in a single setting.

This places a particular challenge before theological education within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). A rural ministry emphasis needs to be included in master of divinity degree work and continuing education programs. Some theological institutions are attempting to respond to this challenge. Of particular note are rural ministry programs of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary and the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center (an ecumenical consortium of theological schools).

B. Networking

An important learning that emerged from the rural hearings was the importance of building effective networks for rural ministry. The two hearings that had the greatest participation were in Des Moines and Kansas City. Both of those areas already have effective rural networks that developed as a result of the farm crisis. In the areas where the other hearings were held, rural networks are either nonexistent or much less effective.

It is clear that a major role of the church is to facilitate the building of rural networks for communication linkage and as a means of bringing people together to discuss common concerns. This makes it increasingly important to develop ecumenical ties as well as ties with land grant universities through their cooperative extension units and other social service agencies. Groups that have emerged through projects of the Presbyterian Hunger Program provide an important source for building such networks.

C. Building Bridges

Another concern that surfaced in several of the hearings was the need to build positive relationships among rural, urban and suburban congregations. For a number of decades a growing rift has emerged, particularly between rural and urban churches. The ministry needs in small town and rural and inner-city settings are severe. Therefore, churches have increasingly competed for scarce denominational resources.

At the same time, there is a growing interconnection between rural and urban issues. The multinational interlocking economic system has produced stress in both settings. It is critical that bridges of understanding be built between rural and urban congregations so that a presbytery can develop a comprehensive approach to mission. Some methods for building bridges between rural and small congregations and urban and suburban congregations might be:

Orientation Exchanges

Persons from urban and suburban congregations could spend a weekend with a rural and small town congregation to become oriented to the area and the ministry of the church. Persons from a rural area could visit urban or suburban congregations.

Work Camp Exchanges

Persons from urban and suburban congregations could join in work projects in rural areas, and persons from rural congregations could join in work projects in urban areas. Participants would receive orientation to the rural or urban setting as they worked.

Presbytery Workshops

Presbyteries could provide workshops that explore the building of relationships between rural and small town, and urban and suburban congregations.

Establishing Personal Interest Relationships

Congregations in rural and urban settings could establish an ongoing relationship of pulpit and laity exchanges on an annual basis.

Cross Cultural Building

Predominantly white congregations and racial ethnic ministries could cultivate ongoing dialogue and exchanges.

Study Suggestions

1. Utilize the process developed in the hearings.

A presbytery or congregation can utilize this process as a means of identifying needs and issues in its area.

2. Common Issues

Study one of the common issues identified in the report.

- Read the section on a particular issue. What surprises you? What do you agree with? What do you question?
- What additional information would you like to have about this issue and where might you find that information?
- Identify the following Biblical and theological implications raised by this issue:
 - How can the church continue to be the body of Christ?
 - How can the Christian community act as God's children?
 - How can we care for and act with our sisters and brothers who may differ with our view?
 - How does the church extend Christian hope in relationship to this issue?

Recommendations

A. Rural and Small Town Congregations are encouraged

1. To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to their neighbors;
2. To work cooperatively and ecumenically with other congregations to accept the mission challenge of rebuilding rural community life;
3. To become attuned to issues of rural poverty, discover the particular needs of persons in their area and develop one area of ministry directed toward meeting one of the needs;
4. To develop at least one program that fosters relationships among persons of different economic, social, cultural and racial backgrounds;
5. To sponsor environmental awareness programs and ministries that will build dialogue and relationships among persons with differing viewpoints from industries, government agencies and local citizens groups;
6. To become open to alternative styles of leadership and ministry including team ministry, lay pastors, tentmaking and ecumenical cooperative ministry;
7. To develop approaches to evangelism for reaching, ministering with and including persons of different races, life-styles and cultural backgrounds;
8. To explore possibilities for providing comprehensive child-care programs.

B. Synods and Presbyteries are encouraged

1. To develop programs to train congregations in faith development and proclamation;
2. To develop programs for building relationships among rural and urban and suburban congregations;
3. To develop new forms of congregational redevelopment, new church development and ecumenical cooperative ministry projects that will enable rural and small town churches to become centers for rebuilding community life;
4. To sponsor rural community hearings as a means of networking and remaining current on issues;
5. To work with rural and small town churches to plan for creative alternative approaches for supporting and enhancing church leadership, giving particular attention to lay leadership training and rural cultural orientation for pastors, including the maintaining of resource centers;
6. To give particular attention to the responsibility and role of individual church members in the following rural environmental issues:
 - a. Sustainable agriculture, including chemical farming and tillage programs;

- b. Forestry concerns, including clear-cutting, forest management, endangerment of the ecosystem and job loss due to restructuring in the industry;
 - c. Mining issues, including government enforcement of regulations, reclamation of surface-mined areas, water contamination from surface mines and spoilage piles;
 - d. Water issues, including contamination of the water supply, depletion of underground aquifers, control of river flow and control of water supplies;
7. To provide workshops and programs on building cross-cultural relationships;
 8. To enable rural and small town congregations to consider church-based community organizing as an effective approach for dealing with rural issues;
 9. To explore possibilities for providing comprehensive transportation networks to maximize participation in programs;
 10. To encourage rural and small town congregations to develop mobile health clinics, church-based clinics, parish nurse programs, and other church-based holistic preventive health services.

C. General Assembly Entities are encouraged

1. To reissue the 1985 report "Rural Community in Crisis" with the 1991 report "The Church: Responding to Rural America";
2. To establish a Rural Life Sunday on the annual church calendar and for that Sunday:
 - a. Study and worship resources related to rural issues be distributed throughout the church;
 - b. Joint programs and educational exchanges among rural urban and suburban congregations be encouraged;
3. To build a rural ministry network to share ideas, models and approaches for dealing with rural issues and influencing public policy related to rural and small town concerns;
4. To develop under the supervision of the Church Vocations Ministry Unit a file of those pastors interested in pastoring rural and small town churches and with experience and specialized training in rural and small town ministry;
5. To include a component specifically related to education for rural and small town ministry in the 1993 Consultation on Theological Education sponsored by the Committee on Theological Education and the Evangelism and Church Development Ministry Unit;
6. To compile and develop resources related to rural and small town ministry, including appropriate study resources, videos and a manual of groups, projects, models and approaches for dealing with rural issues;
7. To continue to raise the issues of rural poverty including unemployment, underemployment, the widening economic gap between the affluent and the poor and the lack of available loans;
8. To develop programs in partnership with Boggs Rural Life Center, the Charles Cook Theological School, the Ghost Ranch, Montreat and Stony Point Conference centers and the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program that will build relationships between rural and urban churches and among

persons of different racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and that can be replicated in local churches and communities;

9. To continue support of family farmers, including racial ethnic persons engaged in farming and farm work, and efforts to promote sustainable agriculture and care for the creation;
10. To give special recognition to congregations, presbyteries and synods that implement any of these recommendations;
11. To lift up and/or develop models of ecumenical cooperation that promote a vital rural ministry and response to rural needs;
12. To call upon the Health Ministries group of the Social Justice and Peacemaking Ministry Unit and the Presbyterian Health Network of the Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association to act as brokers of resources which are designed to aid churches in small towns and rural areas in their ministries of health and healing.

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11. Ralph Paige, "Testimony to the Senate Agriculture Committee," 8 February 1990 (Available through the Evangelism and Church Development Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Ky.).
12. Ibid.
13. Wesley Woo, "Japanese American Family Farms: Report of a Visitation" (Available through the Evangelism and Church Development Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Ky.).

Appendix: Summary of Issues from Hearings

Maumee Valley

Community Issues

- Breakdown of Community
- Rural Racism/Migrant Workers
- Loss of Family Farm
- Conflict Between Opposing Forces
- Cultural Values

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Rural/Urban Split
 - Church as Community Center
 - Church as Reconciler
-

New Covenant

Community Issues

- Corporate Agriculture
- Public Policy
- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Education
- Health Care
- Racism

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Lack of Vision
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Cooperative Ministry
-

San Joaquin

Community Issues

- Corporate Agriculture
- Breakdown of Community
- Environmental Issues
- Education
- Racism
- Migrant Workers

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Lack of Vision
 - Church as Reconciler
 - More Concern for Hispanic Issues
-

Sheppards & Lapsley

Community Issues

- Public Policy
- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Education
- Health Care
- Racism

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Lack of Vision
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Little Cooperation Between Black and White Congregations
-

Susquehanna Valley

Community Issues

- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Environmental Issues
- Declining Farm Population

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Lack of Vision
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Church as Community Center
-

Transylvania

Community Issues

- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Education
- Health Care
- Alcoholism and Drug Abuse

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Lack of Vision
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Church as Community Center
-

Wyoming/Box Butte/Denver/Pueblo

Community Issues

- Public Policy
- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Environmental Issues
- Education
- Health Care

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Cooperative Ministry
 - Develop Ability to be Self-sufficient
-

General Assembly Open Hearing

Community Issues

- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Environmental Issues
- Rural Poverty
- Education
- Health Care

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Limited Vision
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Developing Team Ministries
 - Cooperative Ministry
-

Central Washington

Community Issues

- Corporate Agriculture
- Public Policy
- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Rural Racism/Migrant Workers
- Alcoholism and Drug Abuse
- Myths about Rural Life
- Mind-set of Despair

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Rural/Urban Split
 - Church as Community Center
 - Church as Reconciler
 - Cooperative Ministry
-

Dakota

Community Issues

- Environmental Issues
- Rural Poverty
- Rural Racism
- Alcoholism and Drug Abuse
- General Economy—Youth Leaving

Church Issues

- Pastoral Leadership
 - Church as Community Center
 - Church as Reconciler
 - Isolation from Non-native Churches
 - Church No Longer a Priority for Young People
-

Des Moines

Community Issues

- Corporate Agriculture
- Public Policy
- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Rural Poverty
- Health Care

Church Issues

- Small Churches/Limited Resources
 - Pastoral Leadership
 - Church as Community Center
 - Church as Reconciler
 - Cooperative Ministry
 - Building Self-esteem
 - Theology of Rural Life
 - Presence/Be There
-

Heartland

Community Issues

- Corporate Agriculture
- Public Policy
- Economic Development
- Breakdown of Community
- Environmental Issues
- Rural Poverty
- Health Care

Church Issues

- Pastoral Leadership
 - Rural/Urban Split
 - Church as Reconciler
 - Cooperative Ministry
 - Presence/Be There
-

Rural Community in Crisis

A Report from Rural America
to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

197th General Assembly (1985)



Rural Community in Crisis

A Report from Rural America
to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Rural Community in Crisis

A Report from Rural America to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

*Woe to those who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is no more room,
and you are made to dwell alone
in the midst of the land.
Isaiah 5:8*

Introduction

The crisis confronting rural America has continued to deepen since this resolution was passed by the 197th General Assembly in June 1985, and the impact of that crisis is being felt ever more widely across the nation. Newspapers and television have brought into our living rooms farmers facing bankruptcy, small-town businesses closing their doors, and, at times, violence erupting as the tensions and frustrations become too great to contain. The struggles over the 1985 Farm Bill have come and gone, and many would say the results provide little hope for the family-farm system which has proven to be an effective and resilient means of food production.

Churches and Christians across the land have responded to the rural crisis, and Presbyterians are no exception. Working ecumenically and in a variety of coalitions, local, regional and national units of our denomination have sought to provide or support services as varied as crisis counseling, emergency food, legal assistance, organizing for cooperative action, and advocating for changes in public policy. At all levels of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), attention has been called to the pain and peril of the people of the land. New initiatives have emerged in many presbyteries and synods, often in concert with other denominations through state or regional councils of churches.

Responding to this resolution of the General Assembly, the Program Agency and the General Assembly Mission Board assigned to the Presbyterian Hunger Program the responsibility for working with synods and presbyteries to coordinate Presbyterian response. The Hunger Program is providing staff time and has established a budget to underwrite initial efforts in this area. Cooperative efforts are under way with the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. in strategy and program planning and with Interfaith Action for Economic Justice in pressing for federal policy changes.

The issues of the rural crisis are fundamental to the fabric of American society: How is land best owned and used for the common good? What quality of life do we seek for rural communities? How

much further are we prepared to go in the process of urbanization and concentration of population? How do we assure ourselves an adequate, nutritious, and affordable food supply for the future?

The questions before us are also profoundly theological and Biblical in nature, and we must, perhaps as never before, struggle with what it means to be a part of creation, to be responsible stewards of God's gift of land, and to build and sustain human community among and with people of the land.

This resolution, with its background material, is being published by the Advisory Council on Church and Society and the Presbyterian Hunger Program to make the information and recommendations for action more widely available to the church for study, reflection and mission planning. It is a beginning place for understanding and action, not a final, definitive and authoritative answer. Some parts of the document are already dated because of subsequent developments in the fields and towns, or in legislation. Some sections may prove to be controversial. Many of the recommendations are already being pursued at the congregational, presbytery, synod or General Assembly level. The resolution is meant to be read thoughtfully, critically and prayerfully by the church as it seeks to be faithful, loving and just in the face of the *rural community in crisis*.

Joseph D. Keesecker

Co-Director Presbyterian Hunger Program

April 1986

Preface

Presbyterian social witness on issues of food and hunger has been twofold. Throughout the past forty years the churches have been concerned to provide food relief to those in hunger throughout the world. Beyond charity, however, the churches have also been concerned to promote food production and farming that represent the best possible use of agricultural capabilities.

In addition to their concern for the hungry of the world, the Presbyterian churches have demonstrated concern for the resources and people responsible for food production. Support for the family farm dates from a 1947 statement “reaffirming our belief in the importance of the family farm as basic to a sound agricultural economy” (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1947, Part I, p. 198). The same Assembly opposed the encroachment of large scale corporate farming by opposing attempts to repeal the 160-acre limitation of the Federal Reclamation Law for California’s Central Valley (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1947, Part I, p. 202).

The General Assemblies have been consistently concerned “to make maximum provision for overcoming human hunger and want” in recommending food policies (*Minutes*, PCUSA, 1954, Part I, p. 194). They have, therefore, repeatedly called for agricultural policies that provide “reasonable price and income stability to American farmers” at a level that gives incentive for full production (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1954, Part I, p. 197; *Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1976, Part I, p. 504), that “will preserve prime farm land for agricultural purposes” (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1977, p. 182), and that will “transform agrarian structures in the interests of more justice for small farmers and landless farm laborers” in other countries so that those countries can more adequately meet their own domestic food needs (*Minutes*, PCUS, p. 181, 182).

In 1978, in a major policy statement entitled “Who Will Farm?” the UPC General Assembly affirmed the church’s vital role in supporting the continuation of a strong family farm base for agriculture, with the key to such an agricultural structure being ownership of the land (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1978, Part I, p. 271). Emphasis on the importance of landownership, with specific attention to the critically serious loss of land by Black farmers, was reaffirmed by the General Assembly of the reunited church in 1983 (*Minutes*, 1983, Part I, p. 140).

In 1984, stimulated by the urgency of the rural crisis and a critical need for policy input into the 1985 Farm Bill Legislation, which will renew and revise basic farm legislation for the next four years, the Advisory Council on Church and Society asked the Presbyterian Hunger Program to convene a National Rural Crisis Consultation and prepare a report and resolution for the 1985 General Assembly. The Reverend David Ostendorf was consultant to the consultation, and staff services were provided by the Reverend Bennett (Ben) Poage and the Reverend Joseph Keesecker.

The consultation was held in November 1984, after extensive background study of the issues involved. Participants representing the midwest, southeast, and far west regions included middle governing body staff members, rural pastors, farmers, farm organizers, university extension service staff, agricultural economists, a rural sociologist and rural crisis program staff.

Following the consultation, a report was prepared and submitted to the Advisory Council on Church and Society.

Lead writer for the report was the Reverend David Ostendorf, a United Church of Christ pastor and director of *Prairiefire*, a national rural organizing and advocacy organization in Des Moines, Iowa. The prophetic vision section was written by Dr. David Beck, co-pastor, Spencer Memorial Presbyterian Church in Lemmon, South Dakota. Staff editing was done by the Reverend Bennett Poage and the Reverend Joseph Keesecker, interim associate for Domestic Hunger and co-director of the Presbyterian Hunger Program.

Foreword

An inscription on the United States Department of Agriculture building in Washington, D.C., says:

It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.
2 Timothy 2:6

The pure justice of this statement combined with the irony of its location set the illogical parameters of the crisis in which rural communities and family farmers find themselves trapped today. The American dream of justice is etched unnoticed on a building occupied by an administration whose leader asserts that “farm foreclosures and bankruptcy are a part of the solution” to the rural crisis.

The urban industrial revolution has arrived in rural America. Big, technologically sophisticated and heavily capitalized farming is in. The small and middle-sized family farm, along with the rural community it symbiotically relates with, are out.

Since 1980, high interest rates, the growing strength of the dollar and government programs that increasingly favor the large producer have combined with a cyclically bad weather pattern to forge the toughest economic conditions in rural America since the Great Depression.

Nationally, farm families and community-based businesses face land values declining more than 50 percent from pre-1980 appraisals. Debt service loads grow, even to where the interest exceeds net income. The value of crops consistently fails to meet the costs of production. If this trend continues, over 80 percent of currently existing farms will be gone by the year 2000, and almost all Black-owned family farms will be gone by 1990. If this loss cannot be stopped, over \$500 billion in land, machinery, farm buildings, and livestock will pass from the hands of working farm families into the hands of corporations, banks, other lenders and wealthy individuals, making the “landed elite” in our country richer than any feudal lords the world has ever known—a far cry from the premise our country was founded upon where land and labor always preceded capital and the right to own land was as sacred as the right to free speech.

This report from rural America is dedicated to examining the dimensions of this crisis—from the Black small farmer in Alabama, to the Carolina Piedmont sharecropper, to the traditional subsistence, grit and grub farmers of Appalachia, to the small and middle-sized farmers in the black-soil “golden triangle” of central Iowa, to the small growers toiling in the sun-washed valleys of western America. Their plight is the same, their struggle is the same and their loss is for all Americans. “Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee and me.”

—The Reverend Ben Poage Interim Associate for Domestic Hunger
Presbyterian Hunger Program, New York Office.

The Present Crisis

Our present period of crisis is unparalleled since the days of the Great Depression. An economic crisis in agriculture—one result of decades of public policy aimed at displacing people from the land—hastens the demise of our family owned and operated farms. Ownership and control of our rich land base is being consolidated at an alarming rate, and the loss of farms and people from the countryside is causing serious economic problems in our rural communities. Our cities are experiencing high unemployment rates among workers associated with agriculture-related industries. The economy of our states and of the nation itself is deteriorating because the foundation of that economy—agriculture—is suffering extraordinary losses.

—From “Rural Crisis: A Call for Justice and Action,” Message adopted by the Governing Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., May 17, 1984.

I. The Last Five Years

In 1978, when the 190th General Assembly received the report “Who Will Farm?” and affirmed the church’s vital role in supporting family farm agriculture, the tremors of the economic earthquake now devastating family farmers were already being felt. However, only the most visionary doomsayer could have predicted that within a few short years rural America would be facing its most serious economic crisis since the days of the Great Depression and that by 1984 that crisis would be unraveling the entire social and economic fabric of the family farm tapestry, consuming the very soul of agriculture.

Since 1978 the nation has been jolted by newscasts and headlines documenting the economic squeeze that is forcing thousands of farm families off the land; by stories of angry farmers stopping the forced sale of machinery and land through organized protests; by a massive government payment-in-kind program that paid off handsomely to large landholders but did little to stop farm losses.

State and national political campaigns have been marked by intense and expressed concern over the direction of “the rural vote.” By 1984, the bitter reality of impending doom stalked the American countryside. Its specter was especially sharp and menacing in those regions where family farmers struggled to maintain themselves as the backbone of our economy. Farm families, Black, white, Chicano and Asian fought to retain control of the land and together sought new ways to ensure their mutual survival and well-being. Moreover, this crisis was not confined to the United States but was being experienced in almost every country in the world, with devastating political, economic and environmental impact. As Mark Ritchie of the North American Farm Alliance put it:

. . . low farm prices are forcing many farmers to extract every possible bushel of production from the soil to pay interest on their loans and to survive. Tremendous soil erosion and water pollution problems are resulting from the fence-row to fence-row farming. Worse still this drive to increase production to “stay afloat” financially is the main cause of the tremendous problems we face in balancing supply and demand. Surpluses are being created as a result, which are then used as a rationale for further lowering prices to be more competitive on the world market.

. . . But the most serious threat to “eliminating world hunger” takes place among farmers in Third World countries who are caught in the middle of these price wars. There are

numerous instances in which cheap U.S. grain exports dumped on a country totally destroyed a thriving local farm economy, creating a long-term dependency on increasingly expensive food imports.

It is a cruel irony that farmers in “industrialized” countries and farmers in the Third World are both seriously, perhaps fatally, damaged by low commodity prices. It will take serious government and citizen efforts to better understand these issues and to formulate cooperative strategies for solving these problems. Nothing could be more damaging to the worldwide efforts for peace and justice than a return to a feudal system of monopolized control over the land and our food-producing resources.

—From *North American Farmer*, April 25, 1984.

In the United States the present crisis is rooted not only in decades of agricultural policy oriented toward bigger-is-better farm operations but also in a lethal combination of low crop and livestock prices, high interest rates, declining land values, ever-mounting debt loads and unfavorable weather patterns. This staggering mixture has kept family farmers in a constant state of emergency since the late 1970s. On top of that huge burden, add tax policies that are structurally geared toward benefiting larger operators and nonfarm investors and government programs that skew the most help to those farms that need it least. One begins to understand the daily reality (or nightmare) of American family farm life today. Family farmers have little or no control over their own lives and little or no say over the means of their livelihood. Moreover, when the effects of age-old racial divisions and racial prejudices are added to this mix, it becomes clear why minority farmers—and especially Black farm operators—face the very real possibility of total elimination by the turn of the century.

Numerous reports and analyses from both public and private sources reveal quite clearly the deep and lasting problems faced by rural America:

- Net farm income in the U.S. dropped in 1983 to its lowest level nationally since 1971. Commodity prices from 1982 through 1984 often dipped to parity¹ levels unmatched since the worst years of the Great Depression.
- After 1980, as land became overpriced—in relation to the 4 percent average return on land in the midwestern corn belt—demand virtually disappeared. In the hardest hit counties of the Midwest, land devaluations of more than 50 percent are occurring. This means real estate collateral for loans has diminished correspondingly which, in turn, creates stressed banking and loan situations, arbitrary loan terminations and, ultimately, foreclosures.
- By 1984, farm debt in the U.S. had climbed to over \$216 billion, with about 25 percent of that amount held by people who would be unable to make the next two years’ interest payments on it. Farm debt in the U.S. is growing ever larger and is being concentrated among operators heading for insolvency.
- Some one-third of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) farm borrowers are delinquent in repaying their loans. During fiscal years 1982 and 1983, a total of 15,756 FmHA farm borrowers were forced out of farming. Similar rates of force-outs continued into 1984, bringing the three-year average to more than twenty FmHA farm borrowers a day.
- Nationally, the Production Credit Association (PCA), a major farm lender, has dropped from 384,000 active farm borrowers at the end of 1982 to less than 341,000 at the end of 1983—a

decline of 11.2 percent. A number of local associations across the country have gone broke, while others have consolidated their operations.

- In Iowa, the superintendent of banking says 133 of Iowa's 520 state chartered banks are in some form of trouble. So far the five bank holding companies in Iowa have taken over most of the stressed banking situations in that state. However, according to Robert D. McKee, Chairman of the Loan Committee for Brenton Banks, Inc., in Des Moines, and member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Support Agency Board, "... they are ... about to cease these rescue operations." He goes on to say, "The largest one [bank holding company] shows a two-thirds loss of income from 1983 to 1984. This is very likely to leave future stress banking situations without a successor in many or most cases."
- States, such as Iowa and Missouri, with large numbers of farms and high dependency on strong agricultural economies face extraordinary losses. The Iowa Department of Agriculture, for example, predicted in the spring of 1984 that the state would likely lose 10 percent of its farms—over 11,000 farm operations—by the end of 1985. The loss of that many farms, the department predicted, would mean the displacement of some 60,000 people and would be a staggering blow to a state where eight out of ten jobs depend on agriculture. In Missouri, Eric Thompson, President of Missouri Farmers Association (MFA), Inc., estimates that half of the farmers north of the Missouri River will be out of business by 1985. A Missouri CPA who has about 300 farmer clients was asked, "Who will survive?" "Only those out of debt," he said. Of my clients, only 5 or 10 percent.
- In the South, which accounts for three-fourths of all non-white farmers and 95 percent of all Black farmers, the decline in minority farmers between 1974 and 1978 was more than four times as great as for white farmers—13 percent compared to 3 percent—and continued to fall by another full 10 percent between 1978 and 1982.
- Median annual income for Black farm family operations is well under half of that for white farm families; two of every three Black farm operations fail to earn more than \$5,000 gross annual income from the sale of their agricultural products.
- Medium size farms—in terms of both size and annual sales—are now in the most serious trouble, as indicated by the following chart:

	1974	1978	Change '74-'78	1982	Change '78-'82	Change '74-'82
All Farms	2,314,013	2,257,775	- 2.4%	2,241,124	- 0.7%	-3.1%
By Acreage:						
Under 50	507,797	542,787	+ 6.9%	637,000	+17.4%	+25.4%
50 to 500	1,443,982	1,349,678	- 7.2%	1,238,267	- 7.6%	-14.2%
500 & over	362,234	374,310	+ 3.3%	365,857	- 2.3%	+ 1.0%
All, 50+ acres	1,806,216	1,714,988	- 5.1%	1,604,124	- 6.5%	-11.2%
By Sales:						
Under \$10,000	1,203,920	1,076,292	-10.6%	1,096,792	+ 0.2%	- 8.9%
\$10,000-\$100,000	956,971	959,242	+ 0.2%	841,368	-12.3%	-12.1%
\$100,000 & over	153,122	222,241	+45.1%	302,964	+36.3%	+97.9%
All, \$10,000+ sales	1,110,093	1,181,483	+ 6.4%	1,144,332	- 3.1%	+ 3.1%

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1978 and 1982, compiled by Dr. George Rucker, Research Director, Rural America, September, 1984.

- On average, debt load for those farms with sales over \$200,000 annually is less than four times their annual net farm income, while debt for farms with sales of \$40,000—100,000 annually is 23 times greater than net farm income.
- A 1984 Federal Reserve Board report stated that the nation's biggest farms averaged 18 percent return on equity in 1983, 10 times the return for medium-sized farms. The report also stated that the 1 percent of operations with annual sales of \$500,000 or more earned 48 percent of the nation's net farm income; the 23 percent of farms with sales in the \$40,000—\$200,000 range had only 15 percent of the net farm income.

In his 1984 book, *Causes and Consequences of Structure Change for the Farming Industry*, Luther Tweeten illustrates the significance of this data in terms of the squeeze on middle-sized farms and farmers:

To survive, each sector has had to accommodate to cash-flow and instability problems. The commercial farm sector survives by having access to diversified sources of debt and equity capital and of earnings, and to sophisticated management and technical assistance. The small farm sector survives and even thrives by making extensive use of off-farm employment and income. It may be said that each of these sectors is an extension of the urban-industrial process to the farm; or alternatively, an extension of the farm into urban-industrial society. Squeezed between these sectors is the traditional medium-size family farm, which is often too large and demanding of time to allow the operator to find stability in off-farm employment and too small to use sophisticated management, marketing and diversified sources of capital and income available to large industrial-type farms. Refinancing family farms each generation is increasingly more difficult in the face of growing capital requirements for an economic unit and alternative uses for cash inflow.

Such grim data and analyses can go on endlessly. Overall they underscore the seriousness of the crisis and alert us (for whom the bell tolls) to the unbelievably rapid decline of family farm agriculture in America. However, they cannot fully reveal the human face of the crisis or its devastating toll on rural families and their communities.

II. What's Happening to Rural Families and Communities

On the streets of our county seat town, there were few smiles to be seen. Every conversation contained at least some reference to the depressed conditions. The grapevines of information-exchange trembled with "news" of businesses about to close, farmers about to go under who had or hadn't found a source of operating money for planting. People kept count of the number of families leaving town and how many pupils the local school had lost as parents sought work elsewhere.

Rural communities have lost much in the past few decades. . . . The economic crisis of the past few years . . . has only accelerated the losses: loss of financial security, loss of farm families, loss of neighbors, loss of businesses, loss of vitality and self-esteem.

Measured by empty farmsteads and vacant store windows, the losses keep mounting until

it appears that the very future of the community is threatened. And when the future seems so uncertain, it is easy to lose hope. We become a community in grief.

—"A Community in Grief: Pastoral Ministry and the Rural Crisis," by Ed Kail, Pastor, Mt. Ayr United Methodist Larger Parish, Mt. Ayr, Iowa.

By 1984, the "farm crisis" had begun to take on the character of something much bigger and broader than an economic problem limited to the confines of the farmstead. Uncertainty about the future and the stress associated with the fight for survival put family, neighbor and community relationships on edge. Ripple effects of a faltering farm economy were first felt in small town businesses and then in city factories that provide farm equipment and supplies; many rural banks teetered on the edge of collapse, and some have gone under. In many places across the American countryside, rural life is now characterized by the breakdown of relationships and the fracturing of community.

The impact within and among rural families has often been severe. Financial stress takes its toll in strained and broken marriages; in spouse and child abuse; and in the misuse of alcohol and drugs. Grief and depression over threatened or impending loss of a farm or small business—over displacement from the land—is no longer uncommon and, in all too many cases, has led to suicide. Growing frustration and anger fuels the threat of violence that seems to brew persistently among people pushed toward the edge. Dr. Rex Campbell at the University of Missouri in Columbia says:

In 1982, 47 Missouri farmers killed themselves; in 1983, 59; this year (1984) the number will be higher. The suicide rate for farmers is higher than for any other single occupation.

The tension within families, however, is often exceeded by the tension among families and individuals whose relationships have deteriorated and polarized as a result of the crisis. Until the crisis began to affect more and more farm families and reached into rural communities as well, it was not unusual to hear disparaging remarks and criticisms by government officials, lenders, other farmers and even church leaders that those farmers in trouble were simply the "poor managers," the "overextended" or those who shouldn't be in agriculture anyway. Falling into the classic trap of "blaming the victims" for their own problems, many stood back in judgment upon the so-called "inefficient" and thereby helped lay the ground for increasing polarization. Dr. Harold Breimyer of the University of Missouri says:

It is worth noting that farmers' individual situations are determined in large measure by the time and terms of their entering farming, and not primarily by their operating efficiency. Among farm record keepers in Missouri, farmers losing money because of high interest rates have better operating records than the debt-free farmers who make money.

Farmers themselves were (and still are) pitted against one another, as are farmers and lenders, owners and tenants, creditors and borrowers. Neighbors are alienated from one another, and even those who share the same pews on Sunday mornings are adversaries in their relationships the rest of the week.

The struggle ahead for the church in rural America will not be an easy one. As I think about what that struggle means, I only have to recall what has happened over the course of 24 hours this week alone. After taking a number of "routine" calls at the office one afternoon—hotline calls from farmers facing lenders' pressures, calls related to an upcoming farm protest, calls to finalize farm meeting arrangements—I came home for supper and an evening with visiting family members. About 9:00 P.M., I got an urgent

call from a farmer-friend alerting me to the possibility that the sheriff would be rounding up his cattle and seeking help in spreading the word so our farmers might be ready to show up at his place on short notice to support him if that happened. A half-hour later, another close farmer-friend called to talk at length about his bankruptcy and an upcoming inventory check on his farm that he did not want to permit; he was tense, angry and on the edge. The next morning, I picked up the paper only to read a letter to the editor from a farmer angry about a penny auction we were recently involved in. Later, I got a call from a reporter friend who had just learned that a 45-year-old farmer active in the Farm Unity Coalition had died suddenly that morning from a heart attack. As his priest said, the hard work and stress had taken its toll. . . . That same afternoon, a 44-year-old broke, displaced farmer came in the office looking for help. He was having a hard time finding a job in Des Moines but had been working at a restaurant occasionally and walking some 7 miles from Kindred House to work because his car broke down.

Not every day is like this, but there are more days than there should be when we experience *in full* the crisis of the people of the land and the response of the people (negative and positive!) to our own work. There are thousands of stories across rural America like those from this one day. . . .

—From “A Letter to the Churches on the Crisis in the American Countryside,” by David L. Ostendorf, July 1984.

Dr. Paul Lassley of Iowa State University in Ames has outlined additional social consequences and community implications of the ongoing crisis, including:

- increased demand on local social services;
- stigma attached to losing one’s farm, business, way of life;
- negative attitudes leading to negative behavior, such as voting no on local community improvement issues, failure to invest in the community, decline in civic pride;
- loss of opportunity to become an independent farmer;
- loss of farm and town population, with fewer people remaining to support local services and increased tax burdens on those remaining;
- loss of retail trade and loss of small town merchants;
- loss of a generation of family farmers and discouragement of future farmers from entering agriculture;
- small towns dependent on farming may become more dependent on the elderly and retired as farm families migrate;
- schools, churches and other rural community institutions will decline, as will social, civic and other organizations.

“The present day farm situation,” writes pastor David Schwingle of Kerkhoven, Minnesota, “separates and divides families and people. Many farmers no longer encourage sons and daughters to stay on the farm. Against their wishes, these young people must leave the farm and the rural community. . . . Farmers

have a feeling of helplessness. They feel the situation is out of their control. . . . Rural people fear that the hopes and dreams of their community and way of life are being threatened.” A letter written by a young wife and mother to Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block is an eloquent testimony to the reality and depth of those feelings:

We have been farming 13 years, having bought the family farm after the death of my father. The farm has been good to us, and we have grown to love it, as have our children. They are now the sixth generation to live on this land. It is extremely sad to watch 13 years of long hard labor burn up, but that is exactly what we are doing for the second year in a row, not to mention the prolonged drought of 1980. . . . about that time we were hit with 18 percent rates and for the next two years paid double in interest what we spent for our family living. Last summer’s drought, combined with the high interest rates, low commodity prices and the effects of government embargo several years earlier, has finally taken its toll.

It has been amazing to see how those in the financial know in 1977–78 who encouraged expansion in acreage, machinery and improvements are now talking about the mismanagement of those actively involved in producing food and fiber for this nation. We could laugh if it weren’t affecting us so drastically. . . . As husband and wife we have cried together. We have been angry and bitter. We are still angered when we read where a foreign country has defaulted on a payment. . . . The governmental attitude of forgiveness doesn’t seem to be there for one of its own, however. . . .

III. The Urbanization of Agriculture

The system of agriculture heralded as successor to family farming is *industrial agribusiness*. Its characteristics are *industrial structure*, with clear separation of the roles of owner, manager, and worker; with management at the center, equity supplied by investors with no day-to-day involvement in the farm, and labor provided by wage-earners; *specialization* to allow production activities to be routinized and simplified; reliance on *capital-intensive technology* to replace, not enhance labor; and the adoption of *economies of scale* to build the revenues from which to pay for the increased cost of inputs, nearly all of which are purchased from off-farm suppliers. The values embodied by this industrial agribusiness system are growth, maximized output (profit), short-run profit, bigness, and efficiency. This system is silent and occasionally disdainful toward community, neighborhood, and family. It is singularly immodest in its claims, and entirely indifferent toward its impact on the quality of American life (with the exception of an occasional boast about the number of people fed per farm, and without so much as a nod to the non-farmers who must provide it with everything from tractors to computer terminals).

—From “The Industrialization of Agriculture,” by Marty Strange, co-director, The Center for Rural Affairs, Walthill, Nebraska.

The shaping and control of American agriculture—especially in the post World War II period—has increasingly been in the hands of those who do *not* work the soil. Today, questions about “who will farm” find their answers not among the people and communities of the countryside but among the people of the cities and suburbs. Today, financial and *political decisions* made in urban power centers have as much impact on the vitality of agriculture as the weather itself. This is true internationally as well as domestically.

A study report recently written by the head of the Swedish Red Cross for Earthscan says:

The famine in Ethiopia is caused not by the lack of rain that triggered it but by agricultural practices and deforestation that produced soil erosion, by population growth and by *political decisions* such as an emphasis on cash crops and a failure to develop adequate distribution systems [emphasis added].

Control of capital, of domestic and international markets, of agricultural support and supply industries lies in urban America. People who never set foot on the land make decisions daily that determine the future of the farm families that have constituted the backbone of our food production system. As Dr. J. Wendell McKinsey of the University of Missouri writes in a paper prepared for our consultation:

Not since the Depression of the 1930s have events outside agriculture had so much to do with what is happening within agriculture. Economic policies external to agriculture about which agriculture can do little and which have greater influence today than ever before include high interest rates, budget deficits, a tax code, the financial plight of the Third World countries, the exchange value of the dollar, the European economic community's agricultural policy and trade relationships with the Soviet Union, Japan and the Peoples Republic of China.

During the rural crisis of the 1980s, there has also been ample evidence that public policy decisions about or affecting American agriculture are not being made on the basis of benefits and costs to farm and rural people or to agriculture itself. Rather, these decisions seem to occur as a result of political and economic factors that either do not take into account their impact on the farm and rural economy or may be directly geared toward a continuing shakeout of commercial family farm units. For example, as McKinsey also indicates in his discussion on the economics and politics of agriculture, by maintaining a low tax structure and introducing high interest rates, the burden for controlling inflation was placed on those who borrow and typically are involved in long pay-off periods. "Farmers," he states, "constitute one of the largest and most vulnerable groups in that category."

Current tax policy has made paper farmers of many urbanites searching for a shelter from "high bracket" income tax. As Robert M. Frederick, legislative director of the National Grange, puts it:

The President's Economic Report to Congress for 1984 shows how dramatically tax policies are contributing to oversupply and overinvestment in agriculture. "Tax policy does not affect the profitability of all types of farms equally. People in higher marginal tax brackets (regardless of the source of that income) can benefit more from the tax provisions." The report continues: "In practice, losses from farm operations reduce taxes on other income by more than the total federal tax revenue from farm profits, implying that total farm income for tax purposes is negative." Agriculture has become a complete tax shelter. The effect on farm structure becomes crystal clear.

—From Luther Tweeten, see note 3.

In 1985, the four-year omnibus food and agricultural act, commonly known as the "Farm Bill," comes up for renewal and revision by Congress. Even this representative body, as it makes major policy

decisions about agriculture and the food system, is reflective of an urban constituency with urban values and big-business concepts, since less than 3 percent of Americans now live on farms (as compared with 30 percent in 1920). Additionally, the administration's view of the 1985 Farm Bill appears to be motivated more by "industrial corporation farm thinking" and a desire to "balance the budget" than by any desire to foster public policy health for American family farms. Secretary Block says that the 1985 Farm Bill will be "more market-oriented than anything we've seen before." Don Kendall writing for the Associated Press says:

With a weakened majority in the Senate and a rambunctious House still dominated by Democrats, a 1985 Farm Bill will be the main focus for those groups who view the administration's market-oriented policy as code words for virtual abandonment of the government's traditional role in farm support programs.

Nowhere is the contrast between the administration's somewhat detached, market-oriented philosophy and the real human cost of the crisis made more clear than in the words of Senator-elect Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa and, Secretary of Agriculture John Block as they were quoted in an article for the December 30, 1984, *New York Times*:

"There is something happening out there that is very scary," said Senator-elect Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa. In the depth of the Depression, from 1931 to 1937, he said, the state lost 7.8 percent of its farmers. "In Iowa this year we are estimating we'll lose 10 percent. In one year! We're dying. There's no other way to put it." "Contraction," said Secretary Block, a corn and hog farmer from Gilson, Ill. "That's what we're looking at today."

Moreover, Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's lender of last resort, has done a sharp about-face in the last few years. In spite of mounting congressional pressure, FmHA continues to use its concessional lending terms to finance the expansion of large financially secure farms, farms well able to tap the traditional commercial credit market. In spite of a legislated mandate to service limited-resources farmers unable to secure commercial credit, FmHA is now (data from 1979) making 23 percent of its loans to large farms, which account for just 7 percent of all farms, while making 22 percent of its loans to small farms which account for 60 percent of all farms.² As Luther Tweeten, in his study for the National Planning Association Food and Agriculture Committee,³ puts it: "FmHA appears to have deviated sharply from its original mandate of serving limited-resource farmers." Additionally, Robert D. McKee, chairman of the Loan Committee for Benton Banks, Inc., Des Moines, Iowa, says: "They (FmHA) recently have tended to act like conventional lenders using conventional standards to approve loans." Moreover, FmHA lending in the emergency loan program, the program most needed by family farmers in trouble, is also especially skewed to larger farmers. As Tweeten says: "It is apparent that economic emergency loans represent the sharpest departure from focusing FmHA lending on needy farmers." He presents statistics from the aforementioned study that show that "least needy borrowers . . . with more than \$222,000 in income and \$120,000 in net worth received (in 1979) 27.6 percent of all Economic Emergency Loans." Moreover, 21 percent of this lending went to farmers with a net worth of over \$300,000. While the more needy borrowers, those with a net worth of less than \$120,000 but a farm income of more than \$22,000 received 20.4 percent of Economic Emergency Loans and the most needy borrowers, those with a low net worth (below \$120,000) and farm income of less than \$22,000, received only 29.6 percent of the Emergency Loans. (See table on page 48.)

**Percent of FmHA Economic Emergency Money Loaned
to Various Net Worth and Farm Income Categories, 1979**

1978 Farm Income	Low Net Worth Less than \$120,000	High Net Worth More than \$120,000	Total
Low, less than 22,000	29.6	22.1	51.7
High, more than \$22,000	20.4	27.6	48.0
TOTAL	50.0	49.7	99.7

(Source: ERS, USDA, February 1982)

The inevitable consequences of such decision making and policy application will be devastating for all rural America:

- The “bigger is better” mentality will prevail, in spite of a vast body of research documenting those points at which economics of scale are reached. Those who wish to make a full-time living off the land will be compelled to expand in order to survive.
- Conservation of land and water resources will be secondary to cash flow, and economic pressures will build to produce more on both prime and marginal farm lands, regardless of the resource impacts. Fencerow-to-fencerow farming in hard times is not new to America. The Great Depression created the dust bowl of the thirties, not the other way around, as popularly believed.
- Reflecting the rise in the number of large and small farms and the decrease in the number of middle-size farms of 50–500 acres, the nation will move rapidly toward a two-tier structure of agriculture. Larger and more highly capitalized farms will produce most of our food supply, while commercial family farms of medium size will be eradicated or forced to rely heavily on off-farm income to survive, in the latter case, at a much decreased level of agricultural productivity.
- There will be increased separation of ownership and operation (labor), and tenant farming and sharecropping will increase. Family farmers may end up as tenants or sharecroppers on land they once proudly owned. Opportunities for new and beginning farmers will be limited, especially if they wish to own the land they farm.
- “Gentrification” of the countryside—as of the cities—will increase as those able to buy land for “country living” or second homes will do so—especially if, as in the current crisis, the value of land continues to decline.
- Control of agriculture and of rural America will shift dramatically to financial institutions, investors, speculators, industrialists and politically powerful blocs. Farm and land management decisions will be made and handed down from afar.
- Rural communities and small towns will continue to wither away. With a reverse multiplier effect in force, every small or medium-sized farm that closes will reduce the base supporting public institutions and community services. The farm feed dealer, the hardware store, the grocer, the

farm equipment dealer and the church will have one less active and contributing link in the economic and social chain. In 1981, MacCannell and White, studying the relationship between farm and community structure in the Central Valley of California, concluded:

It is possible to find negative social conditions in communities surrounded by 50-acre farms and in communities surrounded by 500-acre farms. However, there are no communities which measure high on affluence, equality, etc., that are surrounded by large farms or absentee owned farmlands.

Columnist Frank Farmer, writing in the Springfield, Missouri, *Newsleader* paints the picture in another way:

The countryside of tomorrow will not be pretty. Private estates comprising tens of thousands of acres will stretch along major highways. . . . Once-public roads will be enclosed, too, for bankrupt county seat towns will have no means to maintain the roadways, no funds to fight corporate lawyers in the courts. Food prices will soar. They will demand half or more of your disposable income. The pretty flowers, the interesting rocks across the fence you dare not touch, for it will have become the property of someone foreign to your way of life, your hopes and your dreams. You may become their servant. You will never become their equal.

It seems that we are already far down the road to this kind of nation. Many of us who are but one or two generations removed from the land ourselves have lost our roots in the land and among its people. Values and convictions rooted in past generations that lived from the land seem to have no place in contemporary urban and suburban society. Even the term “family farm” is seen as a nostalgic throwback to a distant past. Farming is no longer seen as “a way of life”; it is now “a business.” In order to survive and be successful, one had better learn the new language (“agribusiness”) and live by the new rules. As American Bankers Association president, James G. Cairns, Jr., said in a recent speech to rural bankers in Kansas City, Missouri:

Not so long ago, farmers described what they did as a way of life. Today, however, it is a business like any other business. The farmer who cannot make it is in the process of fading away. Production as a goal has given way to productivity as a goal. That is the new reality.

Moreover, if one loses the farm, one should not expect much support from the rest of society. For as McKinsey states so well:

One function performed by the family farm structure in U.S. agriculture is to disguise the exploitation of labor in a socially acceptable way. Labor unions protect some level of compensation to laborers while they work. Some social responsibility is forced on both large companies and government at the time of large plant closings. But low or no compensation to labor on family farms and the closure of the business are accepted socially, if not socially accepted.

Combine that “social acceptance” of family farm losses with a notion still encountered that “rural” still equates with “backward,” and it is easy to see why failing farmers are often perceived as “inefficient” or “unable to make it” in the “real world” of today’s agribusiness. In the same breath, the people who feed the nation can be condemned and romanticized, judged and praised, put down and lifted up. Usually, though, they are just irrelevant, being outside the scope of our daily experience—even as we trace our own history to the land, or go to the grocery store, or sit down and eat.

I asked him why he had to go away, why the land was so important. For it he would work the long, hot summer pounding steel; Mama would teach and run the farm; Big Mama, in her sixties, would work like a woman of 20 in the fields and keep the house; and the boys and I would wear the threadbare clothing washed to dishwater color; but always the taxes and the mortgage would be paid. Papa said one day I would understand.

—From *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry*, by Mildred Taylor, 1976.

IV. Who Controls the Land?

It always chills my bones to read of the “enclosure movement” that began in England in the 13th century.

The feudal nobility, in an ever-increasing need of cash, fenced off lands that had formerly been used for communal grazing. Enclosed lands were used to graze sheep to satisfy the booming textile industries.

The enclosure movement reached its peak in the late 15th and early 16th centuries when in some areas as many as nine-tenths of the tenants were forced into the cities. Can you imagine the terror that accompanied people who for centuries had been tied to the security of the land?

The enclosure movement has its modern parallel in the United States. Failure of American farmers to achieve parity prices for their products is bankrupting many. They are being forced from their ancestral acres, or from the land they purchased in good faith that “our system” would protect those willing to raise honest sweat to their faces.

But today, the land is gravitating into the hands of speculators, to the wealthy interested only in tax breaks—or to foreigners.

—Column of Frank Farmer, Springfield, Missouri. *Newsleader*.

Every nation and every society has a fundamental stake in how its land is controlled and by whom. A democratic society especially needs to be vigilant to ensure that control over its land does not fall into the hands of the few, thereby weakening the most fundamental social and economic relationships and structures of the democracy. Such a society must, in fact, take special care to ensure that land is justly and widely distributed and that the rights of minority landholders and other small- and medium-sized farmers are protected and enhanced. Unfortunately, twentieth-century America cannot claim an enviable record in maintaining this vigilance or in protecting these rights.

Landownership in America is concentrated in very few hands. Only 3 percent of the population owns 95 percent of all private land. In the southeastern United States alone, the paper and timber industry acquires 250,000 acres each year. Just two paper and timber companies, Georgia-Pacific and Weyerhaeuser, together own over 12 million acres more land than Black America owns collectively. Such a concentration of ownership breeds monopoly, feeds inflation, undermines competition and thus results in higher prices and, perhaps most important, controls the political and economic destiny of our society.

—Joseph Brooks, past president, Emergency Land Fund.

The nation today is careening toward a highly skewed concentration of control over its land and its food production system—with more and more land in fewer and fewer hands, and food production, processing and marketing dominated by large nonfarm interests. The haunting specter of a “landed elite” in this country may not be that far from reality. The concentration of land control documented in a 1978 U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin underscores the seriousness of that possibility and the trend leading toward it.

Region	Largest 5%	Largest 1%	Largest 5%	Largest 1%
Corn Belt	50%	20%	27%	9%
Delta	70%	46%	47%	24%
Appalachian	64%	35%	39%	17%
Lake	55%	23%	26%	9%
Mountain	89%	65%	68%	47%
Northeast	74%	43%	34%	15%
North Plains	47%	22%	32%	15%
Pacific	88%	71%	72%	44%
Southeast	80%	54%	49%	26%
South Plains	69%	45%	54%	34%
U.S Total	75%	48%	53%	32%

Source: Lewis, James. *Landownership in the United States*, 1978. USDA, Agricultural Information Bulletin No. 435, 1980, p. 5. From “Jefferson Ignored: Land and Democracy in the United States,” by Rodney R. Walter with Art Stoltzful, Rural America, Washington, D.C., 1982, page 7.

No one understands or has experienced the grim reality of such a destructive process of land control more than this nation’s minority peoples. The European takeover and settlement of the North American continent was predicated on a sense of divine mission that sanctioned the displacement of native peoples and the “conquering” of the wild land. Between the colonial settlements and the westward expansion to the Pacific, it was supposedly the “manifest destiny” of those with power to take the land and to rid it of its original inhabitants. Jefferson’s ideal of the “small landowner as the most precious part of the state” did not extend to people of color, especially if they stood in the way of settlement and expansion.

The Jeffersonian ideal certainly did not extend to Blacks; it has not historically, and it does not now. In this century alone, well over nine million acres of land have been lost by Black Americans; since 1920, nearly 94 percent of the farms operated by Blacks have gone under. As Edward J. Penick, Director of the Land Fund for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Inc., reminds us: “9,000 acres per week or 500,000 acres annually” are being lost “. . . from the total amount of Black-owned rural land. This astronomical rate of land loss will result in Blacks being a landless people by 1994. . . .” In short, Blacks have experienced a farm and rural crisis for decades in this country, with racism at the heart of that crisis. There is today strong—but often unspoken—feeling that recognition of the contemporary rural crisis has been achieved only because that crisis has finally taken such a toll on white rural Americans.

The implications of continuing land loss and land concentration for rural America and for all America are serious and drive to the heart of the democracy itself. In the long run, those who control land and its production control people. When such power is highly concentrated, the quality of life deteriorates, and the survival of democracy itself, which depends on dispersed power, is at risk. As Jerry Hart of the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition wrote in a recent article for the Presbyterian Hunger Program’s newsletter, *Handles*:

Where landownership is most concentrated, the lack of adequate housing is greater, the loss of agricultural land and small family farms is greater, economic diversification is more limited, out-migration accelerates, and most other quality of life standards are below those where the land is more equitably distributed.

We must recognize that land is one of the most basic social properties and responsibilities of any society. Even though it may rightly be owned by individuals, its use, control and preservation for the whole of society and succeeding generations is the responsibility of all people and of the democratic institutions that should represent them.

Inaction now may guarantee the complete disappearance of Black farmland by 1994 and the virtual elimination of medium-sized family farms by the turn of the century. It may guarantee that large, non-farm corporations and investors play a growing role in U.S. agriculture, even as they do now in California, Arizona and Colorado, as well as in other western states. It may guarantee U.S. Department of Agriculture projections that indicate that by the year 2000 there will be only 1.8 million farms averaging 600 acres in size, and that the largest 50,000 farms will farm 50 percent of the land.

The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in time of great moral crisis maintained their neutrality.

—Dante, 1265–1321

Beyond the Crisis

I. The Prophetic Vision

Look ahead, through fifty years of springtime planting and autumn harvests, and this is what you might find in Iowa's future:

The corn and soybean fields stretch for miles. As far as the eye can see, there is not a farmstead in this sea of green and gold. Old farmyards have been plowed up, and huge tractors and combines roll across what once were country roads and the yards and streets of tiny Iowa villages.

In the entire state, there are only 15,000 farms. . . . The average spread is now 2,300 acres, not the 291 acres of 1981.

As the experts feared, many of the smallest towns that existed in 1980 are gone, and the concern now is for the survival of some of the 99 county seats.

Many towns that have survived are nothing more than rows of white clapboard houses. Other traditional signs of small-town prosperity—the schools, Main Street businesses, and jobs—have disappeared. Even in towns that are better off, the Main streets of many are dying. The grain elevator still stands watch over the town, but the only bustling businesses are the farm supply store and the combination grocery store, cafe and tavern.

Life in much of rural Iowa is empty. The farmers, their families, and the hired help are isolated. There are no neighbors for miles; there is often no town with a cafe close enough for a quick cup of coffee in the morning.

—Randy Evans, “Will Big-Farm Future Plow Up Small Town?” *Des Moines Sunday Register*, January 10, 1982.

The Bible gives special sanctity to the land. It conveys to us an understanding of land as the life-producing force, a force which brings forth food for all creatures. There is no ethical way to use land and creation except as stewards seeking a responsible relationship with the ultimate owner and giver of life.

Those who farm act on behalf of all of us in carrying out the responsibilities of stewardship God gave to all people. Their moral responsibility is direct: It means land well-used and well-preserved and animals well-tended. The moral responsibility of the rest of us who do not farm is to support in every way possible the efforts to be responsible stewards of those who work the land.

Contemporary American agriculture has made this responsibility difficult for both producer and consumer. Given the complexity of the economic system and the extraordinary controls outside the reach of most farmers, the pressure is always on to produce more and more in order to pay higher and higher debts. Given our proclivity as consumers for a cheap food policy, the 97 percent plus of the population not engaged in food production puts pressure on the producer for “more and cheaper” goods, all at the expense of the land and the people who work it.

The prophet Amos condemned the merchants of Samaria for using weights, measures and silver as a means of exchange to rob farmers who had thrived under a simple barter system. A more complex economic system tends to concentrate agricultural land into fewer and fewer hands. Amos, Micah and Isaiah all condemned this development in their own day. The same process is occurring in our own midst as farmers are turned into specialists, producing only a few crops for a volatile marketplace with a system of taxes and borrowing that favors the large producer and those who control capital. But the words of the prophets are also true for us today.

Isaiah warned those who survive such concentration of land that they may end up paying the greatest price of all—even greater than that of those who lose the land and suffer a loss of livelihood.

Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. (Isa. 5:8).

Even today, farmers forced by the economy or by their own choice to buy out their neighbors and farm vast tracts of land in order to stay in farming, or out of their own greed, must face living without neighbors and with no rural community of which to be a part. The price of such “success” shall be a terrible loneliness. It is not the will of God, Isaiah implies, that farmers and agriculture should be divorced from community with neighbors and towns and be turned into a business pursued by a handful forced “to dwell alone in the midst of the land” or far removed from the responsibilities of all people to care for the God-given land.

And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only what they gained and lost by it. And some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even

conceive of them any more, so large that it took batteries of bookkeepers to keep track of interest and gain and loss; chemists to test the soil, to replenish; straw bosses to see that the stooping men were moving along the rows as swiftly as the material of their bodies could stand. Then such a farmer really became a storekeeper, and kept a store. He paid the men, and sold them food, and took the money back. And after a while he did not pay the men at all, and saved bookkeeping. These farms gave food on credit. A man might work and feed himself; and when the work was done, he might find he owed money to the company. And the owners did not work the farms any more; many of them had never seen the farms they owned.

And then the dispossessed were drawn west. . . . Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry. . . . They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying for work to do. . . . Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land.

—From *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, 1939.

II. A Vision of Justice and Community

. . . perhaps the most important role of us as Church is to keep alive the dream which, in American tradition, is pictured in terms of freedom, peace, equality and justice. For without the dream, without this empowering vision of an alternative to our present path, men and women find it hard to continue to struggle.

It is in this context that the Church must dare to speak the truth about where and what we are. We desperately need this clarity of perspective and vision if we are to clear away the smoke of illusion and false gods so prevalent today. This is really a prophetic role. But prophets must not only denounce what is wrong, they must also announce the good news.

I think we as Church have not done very well in announcing the good news—our Jesus remains only historically real and, thus, safe to all too many of us. Our challenge is to discover, for our people, for this time and in today's language, an alternative vision based upon Jesus' life and message.

—“The Church and the Rural Crisis,” a Colloquy by Greg Cusack, executive director, National Catholic Rural Life Conference in Catholic Rural Life, September, 1984.

As people of the community of faith, we acknowledge that we are called to respond and to act whenever and wherever we see people hurting, injustices perpetrated and community fracturing. Simultaneously, we acknowledge our inability, failure and unwillingness (that is, our sin) in not responding or acting to counter those situations, and we recognize that we must recover our own vision of justice and community before we expect or ask others to do so.

This recovery of vision may in itself be a formidable challenge for us when it comes to issues of justice and community in our own rural backyards. For in order to move beyond the rural crisis, we are compelled to examine and analyze some of the most fundamental and deep-rooted beliefs about how our society—its institutions, economy, politics and social structure—really works. We are compelled to

examine our own symbols of success and failure and our own values and attitudes that help shape public policy. We are compelled to sort out the differences between what we would like to think is happening in rural America—the perceived pastoral images, beauty and simplicity of life—with what we know to be happening—disruption and displacement at levels unprecedented since the Great Depression. We are compelled to examine our faith and its challenges to our own way of living and thinking and doing.

The journey of the people of faith to mold a vision of justice and community for rural America has never been an easy one. As Dr. E. W. Mueller, one of the key leaders of the Town and Country Church Movement in the U.S. and a pastor in the American Lutheran Church, wrote of the churches' efforts earlier in this century:

The Town and Country Church Movement drew strength from different denominations, but it developed alongside the church. It was not a development within the church. The movement was never fully accepted by the total denomination. Church people interested in the rural church movement had to fight for attention and support.

The church then, as now, knew how to respond to a human situation that represented economic and social expansion. But then, as now, it did not know how to respond to a human situation that represented economic and social decline. . . .

In the development of rural America, the church has made the mistake of countersigning rather than counteracting the economic forces.

This countersigning rather than counteracting was more than a mere result of the social and economic blend of church in society: It was, and still is, more the result of our inability or refusal to grapple with fundamental theological understandings. As theologian Walter Brueggeman reminds us in his book, *The Land*:

It is likely that our theological problem in the church is that our gospel is a story believed, shaped and transmitted by the dispossessed; and we are now a church of possessions for whom the rhetoric of the dispossessed is irrelevant. And we are left to see if it is possible for us to embrace solidarity with the dispossessed.

To embrace solidarity with the dispossessed and the displaced is indeed the challenge before us in the midst of the current crisis in the American countryside. It is a challenge that forces us to retrace our Biblical roots to the Old Testament understanding of land as a gift, a trust, a covenant from God and not simply as property to be bought or sold or liquidated. It is a challenge from Leviticus that calls us to understand that we are strangers and guests upon the land, and that forces us to wrestle with the radical directives of landownership and redistribution incorporated in the year of jubilee. It is a challenge that compels us to hear and heed the prophets' message: When the people of Israel betrayed God by betraying their relationship with the land, God intervened.

When the kings, for example, began to treat the land as a tradeable commodity, as Ahab did, the prophets rose up to defend the preservation of the land as God's gift and covenant. After Ahab and Jezebel got rid of Naboth and took the vineyard they had so coveted, Elijah asked, "Have you killed and also taken possession?" And then the prophet delivers the word of God: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick up your own blood (1 Kings 21:19)." The land is avenged by the God who gave it in covenant. Isaiah, Micah, Amos and a host of other prophets came boldly into the midst of the people of Israel and admonished them to return to the covenant relationship with God . . .

and with the land and its people and especially those who were dispossessed and hurting. Allen Wilford, a Canadian farm activist, quotes Greg Stamme, an Illinois farmer, in his book, *Farm Gate Defence*, as he speaks to this human condition:

We can't make God-like decisions and decide who we can and who we can't help. This thing is bigger than that. We're going to help them all and let God make the judgment later on. . . . We all need help. My turn is coming. There is no man today who can continue to farm under the conditions we have now.

Like the people of Israel who settled into a new and promised land and then “forgot” by whose hand they had been led and provided that land for all generations, we also have fractured the covenant and the human community that is so central to it. We, too, are in a time of immense danger and extraordinary opportunity. The danger is that we will simply sit back and let the tide of the “inevitable” forces of history—its economics and politics—sweep over us and all the land and its peoples and communities. The danger is that, sanctioned by our silence, those forces will continue to use perversely the fundamental symbols of the faith—hope, salvation and the fulfillment of life among them—in crass, individualistic and selfish ways that neither rebuild community nor recover the vision of justice inherent in the faith.

The opportunity we have before us is, by God's grace, one which enables us to recover and constantly recreate for our own time and for the future the vision of justice and community given us as a community of faith in the Judeo-Christian heritage. It is, indeed, a vision of covenant with one another and with our God—covenant expressed through our care for and support of the hurting and the dispossessed; covenant expressed through our action with them as together we seek economic, racial and social justice in rural America; covenant expressed through the empowerment of people and through their liberation and reconciliation.

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation;
are men who want crops without plowing up the ground.

They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean
without the awful roar of the waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and
physical, but it must be a struggle.

Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.

Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found out the
exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them;
and these will continue until they are resisted with either words or
blows, or with both.

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

—From “The Limits of Tyrants,” by Frederick Douglass (1857).

As we go about taking up those opportunities before us, we must keep at the center of our vision the cross, which stands as the symbol of the suffering and the hope of our people. It reminds us of the suffering, the hurt, the pain, the loss, the tension, the aloneness, the burden, the frustration and the isolation that weigh upon the people of the land during this time of crisis. It reminds us of the impending,

irreversible losses of countless thousands displaced from the land and the threat to our economic system and democratic government if the crisis is not confronted and the loss of farms and farmers stopped.

But the cross also gives us that symbol of life and hope and renewal promised through the resurrection. It enables us to stand up and to stand together in spite of the forces arrayed against us. It enables us to commit ourselves to the struggle for justice and peace, in spite of the costs. It enables us to stand together as community, working to preserve our farms, our land and our people. It gives us strength to recover the vision of our faith that will, indeed, lead us to renewed covenant with our God and with our people and the land that sustains us.

You may burn down your cities, but leave your farms and the cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy your farms, and grass will grow in the streets of every city in the nation.

—William Jennings Bryan

III. Fulfilling the Vision

Statement of Policy and Recommendations

Since 1980, high interest rates, the growing strength of the dollar and government programs that increasingly favor the large producer have combined with a cyclically bad weather pattern to forge the toughest economic conditions in rural America since the Great Depression.

Nationally, farm families and community-based businesses face land values declining more than 50 percent from pre-1980 appraisals. Debt service loads grow even to where the interest exceeds net income. The value of crops consistently fail to meet the costs of production. If this trend continues, over 80 percent of currently existing farms will be gone by the year 2000, and almost all Black-owned family farms will be gone by 1990. If this loss cannot be stopped, over *\$500 billion* in land, machinery, farm buildings and livestock will pass from the hands of working farm families into the hands of corporations, banks, other lenders and wealthy individuals, making the “landed elite” in our country richer than any feudal lords the world has ever known—and turning rural America into a wasteland of the dispossessed.

If we are to “embrace solidarity with the dispossessed” and fulfill our vision of justice and community with the people of the land, then we are indeed called to take action in the world. That action will be based on our biblical understandings of land and covenant and on a fundamental understanding of the socioeconomic and political realities of life in rural and urban America today—including the realities of public policy impacts on our neighbors, communities and institutions.

The 1985 Farm Bill will be an especially critical turning point for American agriculture and rural communities and may well be the most important piece of legislation to affect rural Americans in the last fifty years. Harold Breimyer, agricultural economist at the University of Missouri, and long-time expert on the family farm said in a recent interview for *Farm Land News*: “I think it [the family farm] is going to disappear, but it’s not foreordained. If it happens, it will be an institutional decision, not one based on efficiency.” Breimyer sees the 1985 Farm Bill debate as the last chance to slow the fade-out of the traditional family farm.

Therefore, if the 1985 Farm Bill is not directed explicitly to the survival and vitality of family farm⁴ agriculture, at least through the duration of this century, and if the immediate crisis is not addressed by the bill, we will guarantee the demise of family farm agriculture in the United States. In short, that bill must be a carefully crafted, long-term food and fiber policy—not the more typical patchwork farm legislation that has helped precipitate the current crisis.

As we address the current crisis and the long-term policies necessary to the recovery of justice and community in rural America, we affirm, celebrate and build upon the actions of the Presbyterian General Assembly on issues relating to food, farming and land over the past forty years. We especially commend to the entire church continuing action on those policy goals and programs of the 190th General Assembly (1978) and of the 195th General Assembly (1983) which addressed family farm issues and Black landownership concerns.

We recognize today the seriousness of the rural crisis that grips people and communities across our nation, posing extraordinary consequences for our entire society. It requires an extraordinary response by the church. Ecumenical groups and coalitions in many affected states and regions are already engaging aspects of the rural crisis cooperatively, providing opportunity for rural, city and suburban churches to work together with others in addressing this crisis and seeking long-term solutions for its causes. Many of the synods, presbyteries and programs of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are related to one or more of these organizations and efforts, but the current crisis in agriculture, rural communities and agricultural policy calls for focused strategy and coordinated response by the agencies and governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In the spirit of fulfilling a vision of justice and community in our land, we commend to the church the following actions for immediate consideration and implementation.

Therefore, the 197th General Assembly (1985) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

- I. Requests the Program Agency and the General Assembly Mission Board to take initiative to explore cooperatively with concerned presbyteries and synods the formation of a mechanism to provide strategic planning and coordination of Presbyterian response to the current rural crisis and the need for a new policy approach to agriculture. Such a mechanism should focus on the coordination of existing efforts, capacities and resources in the agencies and governing bodies rather than calling for extensive additional ones; should emphasize and facilitate participation in ecumenical effort rather than creation of denominational program; and should provide a vehicle for churchwide planning and cooperative endeavor rather than development of a national agency program.

[The financial requirements of implementing Recommendation I are variable and the request to the agencies is permissive rather than obligatory. Existing budget categories committed to hunger, community development and economic dislocation response can be utilized for initial planning, depending upon priority judgments by the programs and agencies involved.]

- II. Recommends that the following elements be considered by the churchwide coordinating mechanism noted above, should this be feasible, in the development of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the rural crisis by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or by General Assembly agencies and governing bodies as appropriate.

A. Church Action Strategies

1. Rural crisis training programs for pastors and lay leaders should be developed and implemented, on an ecumenical basis, with emphasis on:
 - Biblical understanding of land as covenant and of the justice community;
 - basic understanding of the current crisis, its causes, symptoms and proposed solutions;
 - exploration of the effects of state and federal policy choices on agriculture, with emphasis on policy alternatives geared to protect family farming and agricultural communities in the U.S.;
 - ministry and counseling with individuals and families in rural crisis situations;
 - techniques of rural community organization and mobilization for dealing with rural community conflict;
 - technical and professional resources for help to families and communities in need.
2. Seminaries that provide rural communities with new pastors or that offer continuing education opportunities should integrate rural crisis training and related programs into curriculum planning and course offerings.
3. Rural crisis education programs and materials should be developed and implemented for urban and suburban churches, utilizing the paper "Rural Community in Crisis" and other resources, with emphasis on:
 - Biblical understanding of land and justice and the relationship of those understandings to the current crisis and control of land;
 - the economic relationships between rural and metropolitan people and the importance of the agricultural economy to the rest of the nation;
 - the role of the family farms in providing food to the nation and the world;
 - the need for urban and suburban support for changing the policies and institutions that have helped engender the rural crisis;
 - breaking down stereotypes and perceptions that have culturally divided rural and metropolitan people.
4. Congregations, presbyteries, synods, mission units and national program agencies should provide increased leadership and support for:
 - organizations and coalitions committed to the preservation and vitality of family farm agriculture in the U.S. and that share the policy goals of the church;
 - local, state and national ecumenical programs and projects to assist rural families in crisis and to change state and national policies to enhance family farm agriculture;
 - nonviolent strategies for social change and economic justice in the American countryside;
 - programs, projects and organizations seeking to stop the loss of Black-owned land in the United States and enhance opportunities for Black farmers to make a livelihood from agriculture.

5. Specific programs to bring Black and white farmers together locally and nationally should be developed, implemented and supported, to facilitate development of a common action-agenda and to confront the issues of racism that so affect Black farm operations.
6. Governing bodies, institution and agencies of the church should review land and investment holdings for their potential use to support the needs and survival of farm families, including:
 - the use, rental and transfer of church-owned land for purposes of family farming operations;
 - the use of church investment funds for deposit in banks in rural areas particularly hard hit by the economic crisis, with lower interest loans made to area farmers by the cooperating bank and lower return to the church investor making the deposit.
7. Denominational and ecumenical efforts in the public policy arena on farm and rural community issues should be focused and strengthened to:
 - ensure that its public policy staff have adequate resources and time to carry out efforts to support the church's policy objectives in the 1985 Farm Bill;
 - ensure that the church's membership across the nation is informed and mobilized to support state and national policy objectives that will help ensure the survival and vitality of family farm agriculture;
 - ensure that the immediate and long-range interests of family farm agriculture and rural communities will be fully represented in the Congress and in state legislatures;
 - ensure that the voices of family farmers and rural people are heard and heeded in the development of public policy in the Congress as it addresses the 1985 Farm Bill.

B. Community Development Efforts

1. Farm and rural leaders and organizations should be encouraged and supported to work together at the community level to meet the immediate needs of families in distress and to develop common strategies to confront the rural crisis and its symptoms in their midst. Such efforts should be undertaken cooperatively by farmers and farm organizations; small business people and organizations; rural organizations; family farm support groups and coalitions; labor; elected officials; lenders; clergy and lay leaders.
2. Entire rural communities and/or their representatives should be encouraged and supported to become actively involved in state and national public policy issues related to family farm agriculture and rural community concerns, and citizens should be especially encouraged to participate in public policy discussions and state or Congressional hearings.
3. Rural communities should be encouraged to reach out to metropolitan communities to "tell their stories about the rural crisis and its impacts on people, as well as its impact on jobs, the tax base and the entire economy and the food production and distribution system.
4. Rural communities themselves should be encouraged to recognize and acknowledge the economic and social crisis in their midst and take appropriate steps to confront that crisis; to rebuild fractured social and economic relationships; and to develop and support public policies that will ensure the health and vitality of American family farm agriculture in the future.

C. Public Policy Goals

Every four years the Congress must authorize continuing legislation for agriculture. The 1985 Farm Bill will focus on matters related to farm prices, supply management and farm credit, as well as on agricultural research, grain reserves and exports, soil conservation, food aid and food stamps. Although ultimately important to the future of the family farm, the 1985 Farm Bill will not directly address other critical issues bombarding American agriculture, such as high interest rates, the overvalued dollar, the skyrocketing federal deficit or tax laws that encourage unfair competition and entry of tax-shelter-motivated capital into family farm agriculture. The prosperity of American agriculture does not depend simply on lower interest rates or increased exports; in fact, during the last decade, farm income has fallen 40 percent, while exports rose 143 percent. These issues must be coupled with a focus on the Farm Bill for a holistic approach to public policy.

The 1985 Farm Bill

In terms of the Farm Bill, we believe it is the responsibility and duty of the federal government to enact a comprehensive, long-term food and fiber policy, with specific price, production and conservation goals designed to protect and enhance family farm agriculture in the United States.

We believe further that this nation must establish a strong system of sustainable agriculture and prevent the continuing concentration of land in the hands of a smaller and smaller number of owners.

The 1985 Farm Bill will chart the course for agriculture and much of rural America for the duration of this century and beyond and may be the last chance to ensure the survival of the traditional family farm. We believe that the Congress as it drafts, debates and adopts the 1985 Farm Bill should ensure that the legislation provides:

1. Price and income intervention mechanisms, concentrating on the desperate need of small-and medium-sized family farms, in view of the sustained low prices being paid to farmers that are frequently at or below the cost of production for such farms.
2. A preferential interest rate on nonrecourse loans available on a limited level of production, thereby preventing extraordinary benefits to large producers while, at the same time, encouraging family farms.
3. For a lowering of the existing cap of \$50,000 on federal farm payments with strict enforcement on any farmer or farm operator who participates in a government program currently in existence or enacted in the future.
4. Production and conservation goals which are met by mandatory and equitable supply management programs subject to producer referendum. Additionally, to reinforce conservation goals, mandatory soil-saving measures should be made a condition of receiving federal support.
5. For commodity reserves, isolated from the market, to be established at a level adequate to protect consumers and to meet humanitarian food aid requirements.
6. Debt relief and restructuring programs that are geared to family farm units only, developed and implemented for the benefit of the owner-operator and not for the sole benefit of the lender.
7. Strengthened congressional oversight of the programs and policies of the Farmers Home Administration with the following steps included to ensure that the agency is carrying out its mandate:

- substantially increase the amount of funds going into the farm ownership (FO) and operating loan (OL) programs, and within those programs the quota of total funds allocated for limited resource borrowers should also be increased;
 - substantially reduce the loan ceiling on all FmHA Loan Programs (Economic Emergency, Disaster, FO and OL) so benefits are geared more toward small and middle-sized farm operations;
 - insist that a priority in emergency lending be made to those farmers whose net worth and annual farm income is less than national median farm income;
 - insist that all the agency's programs provide adequate opportunities for participation by minority landowners, and that the agency carry out special information and support programs to minority borrowers;
 - give increased attention to agency minority hiring practices and the representation of minorities and women on county committees;
 - limit to thirty days the amount of time it takes for processing and approval of all agency loans.
8. Strengthened congressional oversight of the agencies of the Farm Credit System with mechanisms to ensure that farm borrowers are fully informed of their rights to loan servicing options. Beginning farmer loan programs within the system should be strengthened and geared toward minority landowner participation.
 9. That all federally supported programs of research and education in agriculture be legislatively required to focus on small and medium-sized family farm operations, and that such programs be especially targeted to minority farmers and landowners in those areas where they constitute a significant proportion of the population.
 10. Major new research initiatives and programs to be undertaken by the federal government to ensure the development of long-term, sustainable agriculture in this country that will protect the natural resource base from further loss and contamination and provide family farmers opportunities to make a good living from the land.
 11. For establishment by Congress, in cooperation with the most affected states, of a *National Agricultural Commission* to help devise "localized" and multicommodity oriented farm legislation. Such a commission, by drawing on progressive farm groups, farm activists and small farmers, as well as legislators, university professors, agribusiness executives, rural bankers and large farmers for its membership, could produce unity among diverse farm interest groupings and increase continuity in farm policy. Such a commission could end the "cannibalism" that occurs when diverse agriculture groups compete for special legislative treatment. Such a commission could review the entire agriculture spectrum and draft proposed model legislation for the states and for the Congress that benefits all segments of the industry. Such a commission could give agriculture the kind of long-range planning, continuity and coordination of policy it desperately needs.

Other Federal Policy Issues

Beyond the scope of the 1985 Farm Bill, Congress should ensure that the following public policy issues affecting the family farm are addressed in other legislation or legislative processes:

1. A major reduction of the very large government deficit is critically required. Such a reduction would decrease the competition for funds, thereby bringing down interest rates, slowing down the foreign "run" on our dollar and reducing the dollar's value relative to other currencies.
2. Federal tax laws should be reformed in a manner that removes all elements that encourage unfair competition and the entry of tax-shelter-motivated capital into family farm agriculture. Reform should include the elimination or restriction of existing investment tax credit, accelerated depreciation, capital gains and other tax-shelter mechanisms that unfairly penalize family farm operations. If interest rates remain high without tax-code reforms, farm assets will be held eventually by only those who can afford to keep them as tax shelters.

Public policy goals for state governments should include:

1. That states legislate a progressive land tax, scaled to benefit small and medium-sized farms.
2. That states which have not already done so legislate tax relief for farmers who sell at reduced rates or give their land to young, beginning farmers.
3. That states develop and enact laws to prohibit the acquisition of farmland by corporate or other nonfarm investors. In these states where such laws already exist, every effort should be made to retain and strengthen those laws, especially during this period of falling farmland values.
4. That states enact farm foreclosure Moratorium Laws, for the duration of the farm crisis, on both real estate and chattel (mortgage) property.
5. That states establish, through legislation, family farm development funds (such as the one in Iowa) that are designed to provide low-interest loans to young, beginning farmers.
6. That states, in order to preserve remaining farmland:
 - a. Publish guidelines to help local governments protect agricultural land. These could include guidance on different farmland preservation strategies and techniques, including agricultural zoning, transfer of development rights, purchase of development rights, community land trusts and performance zoning.⁵
 - b. Map all farmland that the state believes should be protected from development, identifying all Class I and II soils that are crucial to the agricultural capabilities of the state. The state of California has been engaged in mapping all of its farmland for the last few years in order to identify those areas that are important to the state for agricultural production.⁶
7. That states, in order to expand local markets for fruits and vegetables, provide and/or expand direct technical assistance to small growers through direct market information and training activities.

Request for the Stated Clerk

Requests the Stated Clerk to communicate the resolution and recommendations on the rural crisis to the Congress, the president and secretary of agriculture of the United States and to the governor and secretary of agriculture of every state, drawing attention to the recommendations for the 1985 Farm Bill and other public policy positions of the General Assembly. The cost of such a communication will be approximately \$300.00.

Notes

1. An equivalence between farmers' current purchasing power and their purchasing power at a selected base period (now 1910–1914).
2. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (July 1982).
3. Luther Tweeten, *Causes and Consequences of Structure Change for the Farming Industry*.
4. A family farm is an agricultural unit where the owner-operator, with the help of family members, normally provides more than half the labor on the farm. In this report, the term small farm is generally defined as one that has gross sales of less than \$40,000. Medium-sized farm is one whose gross annual sales are between \$40,000 and \$200,000. Large farms are those that have over \$200,000 in gross annual sales.
5. Abstracted from a recent report, "Harvesting Our Choices: A Study of the Virginia Food System," Rural Virginia, Inc. July 1984.
6. Ibid.



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