THE CHURCH AND THE RURAL CRISIS[1]

Barbara Hargrove

This is a preliminary report on a research project funded by the Association of Theological Schools, on "Theological Education for Rural Ministry in the West." A later and more complete report should be available in some form within the year. The topic of this particular report is specifically the context of rural ministry in the West, particularly the social and economic conditions that have made us turn attention to rural areas of the country, and which is often referred to as "the farm crisis." It will also offer some preliminary considerations about the church and its place in all this. There are a number of other themes that will be covered by my research, but those must wait until further study has been done.

My research has been based partly on reading as much material on the subject as possible, on interviewing farm people and church people dealing with the situation, on a survey of congregations concerning what societal trends they thought would be most important to the church in the coming decade, and on a survey of rural pastors that I have conducted.

THE CONTEXT OF RURAL MINISTRY

The first issue regarding context is the one some people continue to ask: Is there really a farm crisis? Some people, including some farm people, say there is not, that it has been manufactured by persons who are bad managers and by "bleeding hearts" who are looking for someone to pity or to serve. But

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1 Revised version of an open forum presented at the Iliff Week of Lectures, January 26, 1987.

fewer and fewer people out there in rural America agree with that assessment, even if they belong to farm organizations that still argue this way.

International Issues

First of all, there are things going on in the international situation that impinge on American agriculture, things that at least some experts say are not likely to change. Peter Drucker, for example, in a persuasive article in *Foreign Affairs*, says that changes in the international scene are permanent, and are related to something that has never been seen before, an "uncoupling" of the primary economy (farm products, lumber, fishing, minerals, metals, and the like) from the industrial economy. He says this:

> By early 1986 raw material prices were at their lowest levels in recorded history in relation to the prices of manufactured goods and services--in general as low as at the depths of the Great Depression, and in some cases (e.g., lead and copper) lower than their 1932 levels.[2]

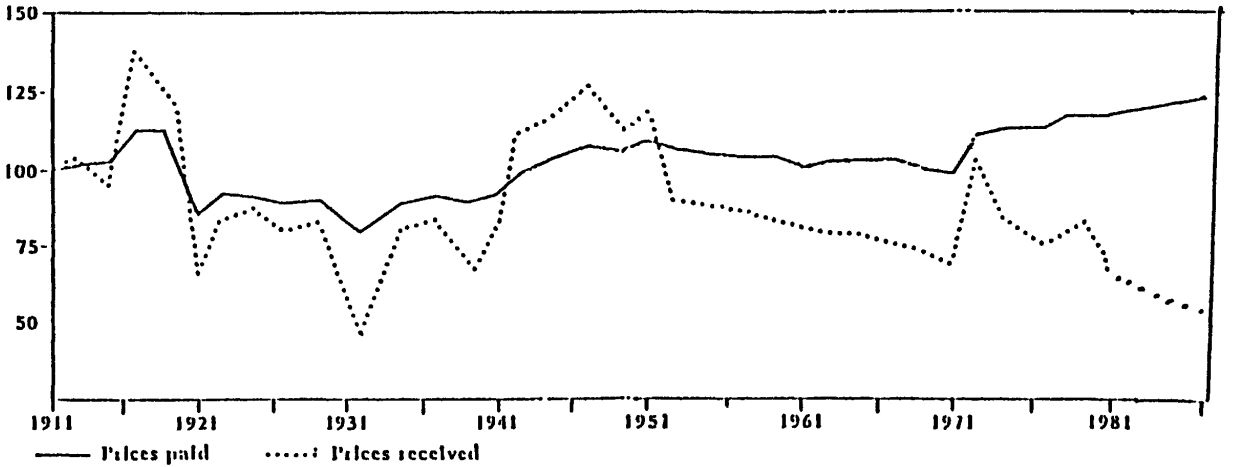
Figure 1 gives some indication of this, as well as of how erratic farm prices are in comparison with the prices that are paid by farmers for goods and services that they need. As can be seen, there has been no time in recent years when prices received for farm products have matched the level of those paid for supplies and services needed on the farm. The closest match was achieved around 1973, which is a time to which many farmers now look as the normal condition. I would posit that this graph casts a doubt on how normal that may have been.

This low level of prices, particularly of agricultural products, contrasts sharply with predictions being made by experts as recently as 1980, who expected that world food demand would increase for at least 20 years, and that world food

2 Peter L. Drucker, "The Changed World Economy," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring, 1986), p. 769.

FIGURE 1

Index of Prices Paid and Prices Received by Farmers, 1910–1981
(1910–14 = 100)



Data from USDA, *Agricultural Prices—Annual Summary, 1980.*

production over that period would actually fall. American farmers, often those most willing to keep up with markets and understood to be the most able managers, acted on that prediction, and bought more land and machinery to till it even though the prices were inflationary. They expected them to pay off as prices went up.

Instead, global agricultural output rose almost 1/3 between 1972 and 1985, and Drucker says the biggest increase is probably ahead, particularly in countries we know as the Third World.[3] This has come about largely through the spread of modern methods of agriculture and storage. The result was well defined by one farmer I interviewed:

> There's one thing about the future. We have what we call the Peace Corps in this country. A lot of people thought that was a great thing. But as far as the farmer's concerned, it's a disaster. We went overseas and taught the people we used to sell our products to, we taught them to raise them, and they just turned into competition. They're taking our markets away from us. So let's talk about the future. What is the future for farming when you can produce three or four times more than you can eat, and you have to sell it against competition?

On other grounds, we are likely to celebrate it if we have indeed been able to help people overseas become more self-sufficient, not only for humanitarian reasons, but because that may make them less vulnerable to the Communist takeover so many Americans fear. But it does lower the market for American agricultural goods.

We could say, as some do, that the United States needs to move out of farming, and concentrate on industries where we might have more of a competitive edge. But not only is the number of those industries shrinking and their need for labor that migrates off the farm diminishing, but there are also other economic costs to the nation. For example, Drucker says:

> [I]f the ratio between the prices of manufactured goods and the prices of non-oil primary products (that is, foods, forest products, metals and minerals) had been the same in 1985 as it

3 loc. cit.

> had been in 1973, the 1985 trade deficit might have been a full one-third less...if primary product prices had not collapsed, America's balance of payments might even have shown a substantial surplus.4

Much of our national debt, then, is related to the fall of agricultural prices. And much of the problem of rural America has to do with farm debt. As demand for products has gone down, return on investment in farm land has fallen, so that few people want to buy farmland. Prices have plummeted.

Farm Debt and Outmigration

Figure 2 shows the relation of farm assets to farm debts in the United States. At first glance, this graph appears hopeful--the "liability" slice does not seem to be completely overtaking the amount of assets, the amount of equity farmers hold. But we must remember two things: these are national figures, taking in a wide variety of operations and areas, including urbanizing areas where the value of farmland continues to go up as it is sold for expanding city use. Not only is this true, but the most important factor is the ratio of debt to equity. As the prices fall, the size of the debt may not increase, but its relation to the amount of equity grows. The Federal Credit System, which includes the Farm Home Administration, the Federal Land Banks, and the Production Credit Association, is required by law to foreclose on mortgages when the value of the property fails to equal 80% or more of the debt for which it is mortgaged. As agricultural property values fall, farmers who have never missed a mortgage payment find themselves facing foreclosure. The Farm Credit System, which has been the lender of last resort and hence likely to be involved with the largest number of troubled borrowers, tends to be the most rigid about enforcing these rules. Banks, especially those that are locally owned, tend to be more flexible, even though they are expected to hold to the

4 Ibid, p. 771.

FIGURE 2

Farm Sector Balance Sheet

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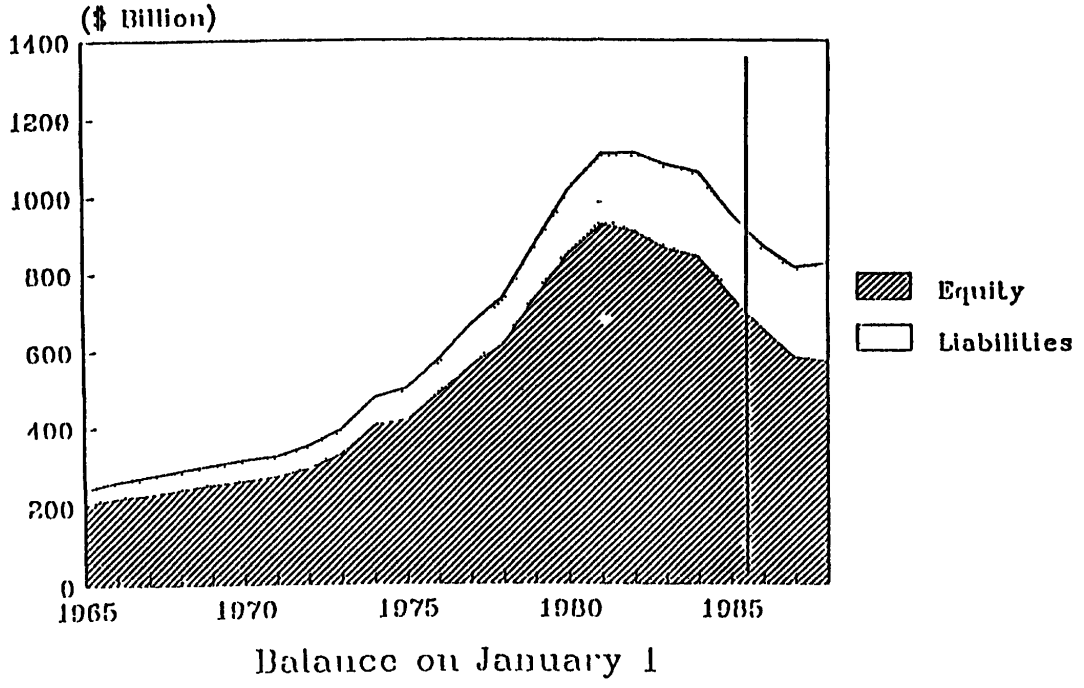


Source Data Resources, Inc

same rule. Some have deliberately avoided reevaluating their assets, knowing the domino effect that would ensue in the community if they began a series of foreclosures. All too often, however, the result has been that the banks themselves have failed. And indeed, the effects of the current situation are spreading to include local businesses, local government and institutions, as well as many of their suppliers, no matter how distant their headquarters.

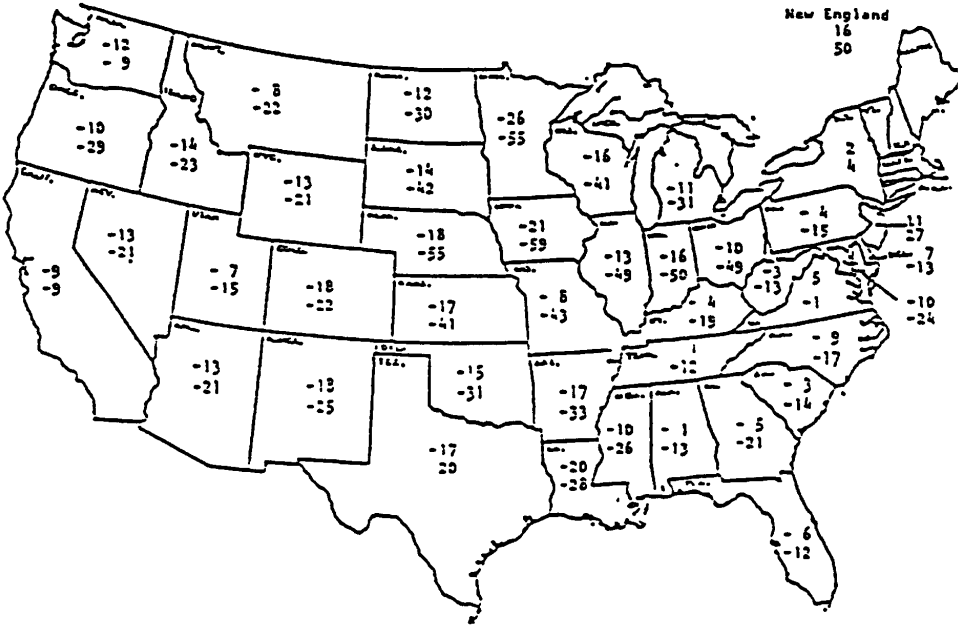
Meantime, the Farm Credit System has set up a holding company to handle the land it has taken over. Recently, in at least two states (Minnesota and Wisconsin) this holding company has begun to put that land on the market at auction, thus further depressing the value of farm land in those areas--which of course may make other farms eligible for foreclosure.

Map 1 indicates changes just since 1981 in farm land values in each state.[5] The figure on the bottom in each state indicates how much land values have fallen for that whole period, e.g., Nebraska, 55%; Kansas, 41%; South Dakota, 42%; etc. But as I concentrate my study on the West, I am particularly concerned with the upper figure, the amount the values fell in *just one year*, between 1985 and 1986. Thus while Colorado lost 22% over the 5-year period, it lost 18% in just the last year, which indicates to me that the trend is going up at a rather alarming rate. In New Mexico, Wyoming, Idaho, Arizona, the figures are similar. One thing that means to me is that the problem is moving west. Many farmers from here west are only *beginning* to feel the pinch, and the worst is likely still to come.

Also of interest is the fact that this map came from a report of a subcommittee on intergovernmental relations of the U. S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, and was concerned

5 Taken from "Governing the Heartland: Can Rural Governments Survive the Farm Crisis?" A Report of the Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1986.

MAP 1: Percent Change in Average Value of Farm Real Estate Per Acre
April 1, 1985 - February 1, 1986 and
February 1, 1981 - February 1, 1986



Top No.: Change from 1985 to 1986
Bottom No.: Change from 1981 to 1986
Source: USDA

with the problem of providing governmental services in localities with a diminishing tax base. This is a real issue. As unemployment grows, along with the stresses of financial failure, there is more pressure put on social services at a time when there are fewer resources to pay for them. As businesses die, the tax base is eroded even further. Maintaining schools becomes a heavier burden on tax payers who are also struggling, and so it goes, in a descending spiral, so that the quality of rural living goes down and down. From lay people and clergy respondents alike, I hear an almost constant refrain: "All our young people have to leave to be able to find work. There are no jobs. There is little hope."

While farmers are not the only ones to be leaving, their exodus gives a sense of the overall picture. Map 2 comes from a survey made by a group one would expect to be fairly conservative in their reporting, the American Bankers Association. It gives us the number of farmers in each state leaving farming *each week.* They are being followed by a host of others whose living was made providing agricultural goods and services. Figure 3 gives some indication of the networks that are affected by this process.[6]

The "multiplier effect" of this situation on rural areas, and eventually on urban ones, can be seen on this chart. At this point the "rural crisis" becomes far more general than "rural."

Issues Concerning Water

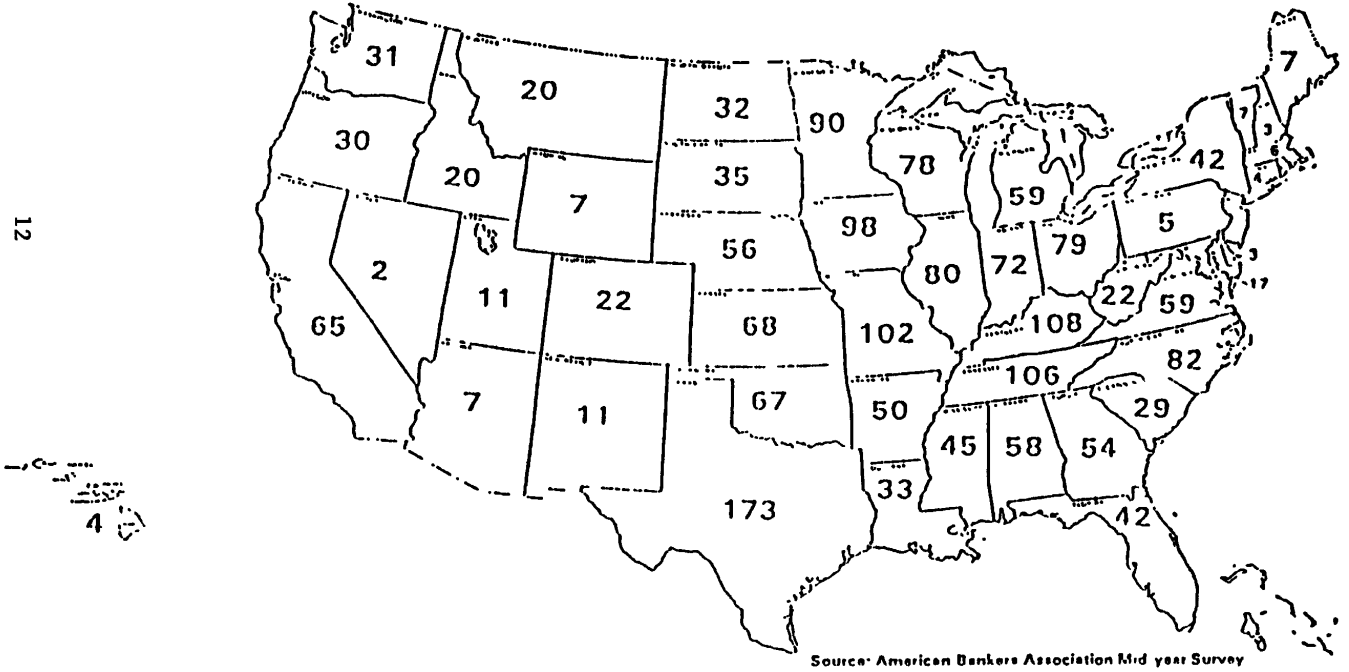
There are other problems that add to the confusion. One, particularly important in the West, is the issue of water. One way farmers have increased production is through irrigation. In some areas this has involved digging deep wells and pumping water from those great underground lakes known as aquifers. However, so many have does this that they are lowering the water table in those aquifers far faster than it can be replaced naturally. The

6 Courtesy of Charles Kanten, American Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN.

MAP 2

Over 2100 farmers leaving farming every week.

According to the American Bankers Association Mid-Year Survey, the rate of loss of farmers has steadily accelerated over the past five years. The map below translates the survey results into numbers of farmers being lost each week.



Source: American Bankers Association Mid year Survey

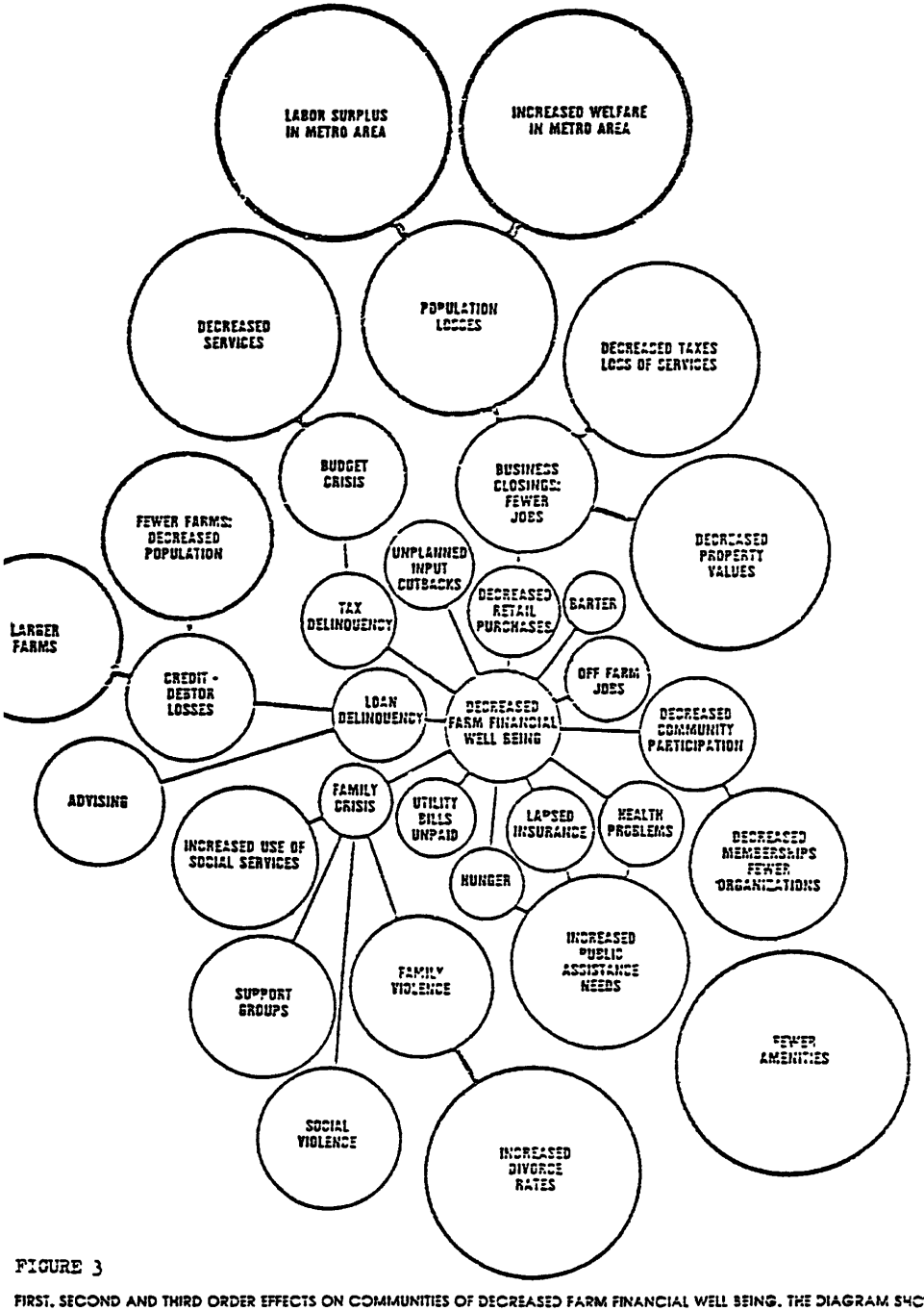


FIGURE 3

FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD ORDER EFFECTS ON COMMUNITIES OF DECREASED FARM FINANCIAL WELL BEING. THE DIAGRAM SHOWS THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE FARM ECONOMY AND HOW THE ENTIRE RURAL COMMUNITY IS AFFECTED.

wells have to go deeper and deeper, which means not only greater expense in digging them but also in raising the water to the surface. With rising energy costs, many farmers find themselves holding expensive wells and sprinkling equipment that they cannot afford to use--but neither can they afford not to use them, for not only is dry land production too low to cover the debts they have incurred, dry land once put under irrigation does not produce dry land crops at the rate it did before it was irrigated. It has essentially been "spoiled" for some time to come. In addition, the machinery needed to till dry land farms is often different from that used on irrigated ones, making it difficult for farmers to make the switch.

In other areas of the West, irrigation comes from the streams and rivers, and from reservoirs that have been built to store river water. The development of that system and the distribution of water from western streams and rivers has been a vital issue in the politics of the West, and it remains so. The most serious issue along that line at the present time is the contest over water between growing and thirsty areas of urban development and the agricultural areas nearby. Here in Colorado, people in small towns along the Arkansas River expect the death of their communities as the City of Aurora takes over water rights on that river. And further north, farmers have told me of the way in which the City of Thornton has bought up farms that own most of the rights to a reservoir upon which they depend, going first to farmers about to face foreclosure, then to those ready to leave the farm for retirement or other reasons. Then other farmers, concerned over being able to get their water from the system, were pushed to sell. In Arizona, similar buy-outs of agricultural water are going on. And in most urbanizing areas the expansion of housing and industry tends to be onto the best farmland, because such land has the best water rights, which can then be transferred to domestic and industrial use. As the farm population has dwindled, so has its political power, so there is

little likelihood that this transfer of vital water from agricultural to urban use will be prevented by political action. One model is available, from the state of California, where battles over water began early and were particularly bitter, and where large corporate farmers have considerable political influence. There the state claims ownership of the water and attempts to distribute it in ways that are best for the common good, though it is not difficult to imagine that there are many versions of what is the common good among which state agencies need to adjudicate.

Irrigation has also brought problems of salinization of the soil, where the water used has left minerals behind that eventually poison the land. This is exacerbated at the present by the heavy use of herbicides, insecticides, and commercial fertilizers that may leave toxic residues behind.[7] The use of such materials also has been found to endanger the health of rural people, whether farm owners, farm labor, or others who simply live in the path of spray planes and the like.[8] In addition, a number of rural areas are dealing with decisions made in urban centers to create toxic waste dumps in their neighborhood, with the likelihood that underground water will be polluted.

The Problem of Farm Labor

While so far we have been concentrating most on family farmers, who own and operate their own farms, many of these issues also apply to farm labor, and in the West there are many areas where farm labor is an important factor. Many of the farmers I talked to have said that they no longer hire help, trying

7 See, e.g., *Eroding Choices, Emerging Issues: The Condition of California's Agricultural Land Resources.* San Francisco: American Farmland Trust, 1986, particularly pp. 46-68.

8 For example, see *It's Not All Sunshine and Fresh Air: Chronic Health Effects of Modern Farming Practices*, Walthill, NE: Center for Rural Affairs, April, 1984.

to get by just on family to do the work, because they cannot afford to pay out any more money. But on the large fruit and vegetable farms of the West that is impossible. These crops are highly perishable, and must be harvested swiftly. While many machines have been developed to harvest some of these crops, others simply cannot be harvested by machine. Labor in these fields is hard and backbreaking, and not many people are willing to do it. Most of the work is done by migrant laborers who follow the harvest north as the seasons progress, and many of these people are of minority background, mostly Hispanic or Native American in the West. Migrant workers are the least politically powerful group in the nation, and have often been exploited by farmers. At the same time, wages are enough better and jobs plentiful enough to attract laborers across the border from Mexico. The current tightening of immigration laws dries up a source of cheap labor on which farmers have depended. In this ambiguous situation, everyone seems to be losing, and farmers are once again reminded of the international nature of their business as imported Mexican fruit and vegetables undercut their prices. Even the large corporate farms which are often seen as villains of the piece, both because of their tendency to take over smaller family farms and because they are seen as the primary oppressors of laborers, are feeling the pinch. One report I have received is that some of the huge farms in California's Imperial Valley have been losing as much as $700,000 per year in recent times. While their economic base may be large enough that that figure is not as daunting to them as it would be to some people, they still cannot continue in business forever with that kind of annual deficit.

Other Economic and Social Issues

The situation as regards other primary products impacts the rural West in many ways. Many farmers had been able to survive low prices for their products because they had supplemental

income from oil wells on their land. Now those wells are idle, and just when supplemental income is most needed, it is gone. Many towns in the West depend upon mining or oil and gas much more than upon agriculture, and they are suffering even more in some cases than the farm towns. Lumbering in the Pacific Northwest, but also in the Rocky Mountains, is not providing the kind of income it once did, and people in towns dependent upon that industry are hurting.

Some of my clergy respondents did not report financial problems in their areas, however. Some, as optimistic as rural people often have been, reported that the economy in their areas had "bottomed out" and was improving. Others pointed to factors that kept their areas from succumbing to the rural recession. Many of these were in areas fairly near metropolitan centers, where farm land was increasing in value due to suburban expansion. There the problems were not so much economic as social. Small communities are being invaded by people who have different lifestyles and values, who work in distant cities and have no sense of community in the place where they return at night to sleep. Formerly self-sufficient towns are becoming bedroom communities, and many of them struggle with what that means to their people.

Even here, the improved economy may be more apparent than real. In a study done in California, the costs to such communities of providing schools and services more often than not outweighed the advantages of increased population. Most commuters do not spend much of their money in such towns, but do their shopping in the cities where they work. They seldom add much to the pool of voluntary community services, both because of the time factor involved in commuting and because their interests are not focused on that small town. The tax base for suburban development is likely to be less than the cost of services, as compared with agricultural use.

In general, then, rural communities are in trouble.

Local Churches and Rural Stress

As for ministry in these communities, a number of issues are raised. The first has to do with the condition of the churches. They have not been immune from the forces that have weakened other local institutions. As the economic base of the community dwindles, church members have less money to give to the church. At the same time, the stresses of economic decline add to the demand for various services from the churches. Ironically, there is much hunger in the food-producing section of the society. People find themselves in need of basic things like shelter. Churches, with less resources available, are often called upon to supply these needs. One minister, for example, told me recently that his church has long kept a food pantry for people in need, who until now have always been people who were not members of the congregation. Now church members are coming for food.

Individual and family stress have increased exponentially in rural areas, resulting in domestic violence, illness, and all too often, suicide. Pastoral counseling is needed as never before.

At the same time, many churches stand in a particularly sensitive place on these issues. One question I asked in my clergy survey concerned the nature of the "folk religion" of their people. Many ministers answered simply in terms of their relative conservatism or liberalism. But others went on to describe a general stance toward the world that I think is common among rural folk, an expectation that if one works hard and lives a relatively clean life, God will reward. When they work hard and no rewards come, they tend to lose their faith. There is also the social aspect of that: In many rural areas the people who have been involved in local churches, particularly those of mainline denominations, have been the relatively successful. Those whose farms were rundown or failing, like those who were reduced to being laborers on someone else's farm, have been less likely to be counted among the company of the faithful. So when

a farmer begins to find the business going downhill, the first indication may be a reduction in involvement in the local church. One is ashamed not to be able to pay the pledge given to the church, but more than that feels that one's place is not among the company of those whom God has blessed. So often the pastor is the last person to whom they wish to go with their hurt and pain, and fellow members of the congregation also come under suspicion. They expect judgement, not support, and to tell the truth they are often right. Many rural people in the churches do indeed subscribe to the idea that financial trouble can be equated with moral inadequacies.

One way in which many churches have moved into this area is in the support of rural crisis hotlines, where people in trouble can call for help. These hot lines offer information on legal assistance, psychological support including support groups that meet far enough away from home that a person might attend without being seen by the neighbors, sources of retraining for farmers who must seek other employment, and a host of other services.

Church Advocacy on Farm Issues

Partly out of what has been discovered through the hotlines, and partly out of a general understanding of the need of the churches to work toward justice, another way in which the churches have moved to help has been in the role of political advocates. Religious groups have joined others to push for legislation that might mitigate some of the most severe problems raised by sudden foreclosure and the like. For example, in Colorado, the Colorado Council of Churches was one of many groups that backed a legislative bill that would give farmers some options at the time of foreclosure; and they are currently supporting some amendments to that bill, including a requirement for mandatory mediation, during which time a farmer might be able to obtain help in knowing what the options might be. On the other side of the coin, church groups have also been involved in

supporting bills that would improve the conditions of farm labor, an issue some farmers see as an attempt to increase their costs at a time when the slightest increase may bankrupt them. Church groups also have become involved in the whole business of the pollution and destruction of the natural environment, at least some of which includes the issues mentioned before concerning rural health.

Advocacy of rural issues raises serious questions. One of the political issues in this entire situation has to do with whether or not it is important to maintain the family farm, to keep people on the land who had been its stewards for generations. There is no doubt that what is going on when larger farmers or corporations buy up rural property that can no longer be handled by the current owner, and the displaced persons move on to some urban area, they are only continuing a trend that has long been a part of American history. As long as industry needed laborers and the land could be tilled by fewer people, it has seemed to contribute to the public good to have rural people move to industrial sections to build up the economy. There have always been debates about whether that was good in terms of the quality of life, but anyone who had suffered through the hard labor in rural areas and done without the amenities taken for granted in the city was not likely to be concerned about that. Now, however, most rural areas have most of those urban amenities--electricity, running water, access to communications, etc. In addition, the industrial base of the nation has moved away from being labor intensive, so that a move to the city does not necessarily mean economic improvement, but often further impoverishment. Unemployed rural people add to the burden of city services. While most family farmers have more skills to offer urban areas than many of the unskilled and uneducated earlier migrants, it is quite likely that they are not needed in contemporary industry. In most urban areas, reasonably priced housing is difficult to find, while in rural areas there are empty houses

that need occupants. So for very practical reasons there is argument for maintaining the rural population where it is.

It is also considered a truism that people who live on the land are more likely to consider its long-term good. Family farmers who intend to pass the land down to their children and grandchildren are more likely to engage in activities that add to the value of the land than are corporations whose demand is for immediate profit and who can move on to other economic endeavors whenever they offer greater value for the dollar of investment. For example, the story is told of farms falling into the hands of mortgage holders such as giant insurance companies, who have ordered the destruction of years of careful soil conservation practices so that fields may be handled more efficiently by larger equipment, regardless of the costs in soil erosion. At the same time, the pressure for greater production has caused many family farmers to do things they know are not best for the land, simply to gain enough income to keep the property. This includes ignoring forms of soil conservation they know to be necessary, as well as moving toward a single crop rather than the rotation of crops that has the possibility of renewing some aspects of the soil. The destruction of arable land worldwide is at a terrifying high.[9]

Ministerial Strategies

In the meantime, however, people in rural areas are in trouble, not only financially but psychologically. At first glance, the reports given me by ministers would indicate that they are not involved in the kind of care and counseling called for by the situation in the more rural areas. The self-description of how pastors spend their time shows that time spent in counseling increases as the size of the town grows, and that

9 See, e.g., C. Dean Freudenberger, *Food for Tomorrow?* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.

rural pastors spend by far the greatest share of their time in preparing for and leading worship and in calling. But in the more intimate and informal social structure of rural areas, it is in calling that most counseling is done. One helps others to think through their problems over a cup of coffee in the kitchen, rather than in the pastor's study. In fact, it is only when this kind of calling has been a regular part of a pastor's routine that he or she can stop by to see people who are now in financial trouble, for only under these circumstances does it not advertise to the neighbors that there is a problem people do not want to talk about. I would hope that one of the things rural pastors might be doing is to help people understand that their problem should be talked about, because it is shared by many other neighbors who also are isolated and in pain. The minister is one who is expected to speak for the community of the church, and it is up to him or her to assure people that it is a community of support, not of judgement. This, of course, may involve leadership in helping the congregation really to be that community of support.[10]

One of the most common spiritual problems described by rural pastors as serious in their area was that of "apathy." Some simply put it that way, and left it to the reader to understand what was meant. But others spelled it out in two different ways. For some, the problem of apathy was that people had given up hope. They saw their communities dying but did not know what

10 For good examples of what is being said about ministering to rural people in stress, see Joan Blundall, "Dealing with the Human Pain of the Rural Condition," in *Renew the Spirit of My People: A Handbook for Ministry in Times of Rural Crisis*, pp. 31-38. Des Moines: Prairiefire Rural Action, Inc., 1986, and Jerry Tews, "Stress and Counseling," Ibid., pp. 39-44. Also see Darold H. Beekmann, "Ministry among the People of the Land in the '80s," *Word and World* VI: 1, (Winter, 1986), pp. 5-17, and David L. Ostendorf, "Toward Wholeness and Community: Strategies for Pastoral and Political Response to the American Rural Crisis," Ibid, pp. 55-65.

they could do about it, and had then simply slipped into a kind of numbness that was difficult to overcome. Others were concerned that their people felt apathy toward the church, that there was no commitment to their congregation, its programs, or as far as they could see, to its teachings.

A question I would raise is the relation of the two, and the nature of our programs and teachings. If the church is not able to provide them with a sense of hope that lifts them from the first type of apathy, why should they have strong commitments to its programs? I wonder if the problem is that our teachings have become irrelevant to the lives of the people. And in rural areas, that leads to the question of the kinds of theology we live in and its relevance to how we treat the earth on which we live.

Developing Relevant Theologies

Perhaps one of the more interesting and less publicized kinds of work that is being done through the churches has to do with the development of an appropriate theology to deal with the situation. Clearly, the notion of a kind of "works righteousness" that emphasizes hard work and expects rewards from God for it is inadequate. It leaves farmers with no hope when things go wrong, nor does it provide motivation for some of the changes that may be necessary. Some contemporary liberation theology seems to apply to the growing powerlessness of rural people. Again, it seems inadequate in itself, for it is not only power that is involved here.

Work is now being done on constructing a whole new paradigm of the place of humans in the natural world, that includes issues of how we till the land and understand our relation to it. Many farmers, particularly those who love their land and would like to do what is best for it, are beginning to respond to a theology that supports that love of the land by emphasizing a sense of belonging to the earth, and of participation in natural processes

as part of understanding our relationship to God, rather than assuming a stance of domination and manipulation toward the environment. Restating the Genesis command from God that humankind should have dominion over the earth and its creatures, some theologians are reminding us that "dominion" means "kingly rule," and that there is no biblical support for a king who would exploit and destroy his subjects.

Some of the work that has come out of feminist theology, that emphasizes nurture rather than accomplishment, is now coming to be applied to the way in which people, including farmers, relate to the land.[11] However, in all too many cases, this kind of theologizing is occurring in academic settings, and not brought within reach of the average rural person.

Similarly, some people are beginning to recover some of the attitudes toward the land that come from the cultures of Native Americans,[12] though again there are cultural biases that must be overcome before such recovery is taken to be acceptable.

Many of these theological perspectives are being joined to movements in other parts of the society than the church. For example, at a conference I attended last year, speakers included not only theological thinkers working on some of the ideas I have noted, but also an agronomist who is a plant geneticist, who is working on developing perennial grains that could come near to duplicating the natural grasses of his native Kansas but also produce edible grains for human and animal consumption.[13] Other

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11 See, e.g., Joe Paddock, Nancy Paddock, and Carol Bly, *Soil and Survival: Land Stewardship and the Future of American Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986, pp. 127-139.

12 See, for example, George E. Tinker, "Native Americans and the Land: 'The End of Living, and the Beginning of Survival,'" *Word and World* VI: 1 (Winter, 1986) pp. 66-75; and Paddock, et. al., op. cit., pp. 103-119.

13 See Wes Jackson, "A Checklist of Considerations in Agriculture," in *Proceedings, Forum on Church and Land*, Vol. I, Nov., 1986, pp. 68-90. Also, Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980.

people are experimenting with crops long suppressed where modern agriculture has dominated, but which have supplied high quality nourishment to peoples in supposedly "backward" societies.[14] Many of these crops may be able to feed people with less stress on the land, preserving it for future generations as our contemporary methods do not. A theological appreciation of such responsible stewardship of the earth would seem appropriate.

Denominational and Ecumenical Strategies

One activity that many churches are beginning to become involved in is that of church pairings, where an urban congregation and one from a rural town set up communications between them, visiting one another, trading pastors or choirs, or otherwise getting to know one another as human beings. Such activities have the opportunity to sensitize people in urban areas to the needs of rural communities in ways that may, among other things, influence some of their political ideas. At the same time, the kind of stewardship ethic just discussed is something that can be practiced in other ways in cities, and so the rural people may have much to teach the urbanites.

At the moment, I think one thing that needs to be done in the rural church is a good deal of deliberate theologizing. That is, I do not think that ministers in their studies or theologians in academe can prescribe for rural America or the rest of the world the way in which they might apply their faith to their current situation. It is the rural people themselves who are the experts on that situation, though often they are locked into only one way of looking at it.

What I think is needed is for our seminaries to train pastors who can be the kind of "theologians in residence" who take seriously the input of the people in their congregations, but who also can provide guidance for them as they attempt to

14 See "Quenoa Research and Development," Newsletter of Sierra Blanca Associates, Denver, CO, January 19, 1987.

explore the ways in which their faith can be related to their daily lives.

One of the challenges of rural congregations, according to many of the clergy respondents as well as my own observation, is that they tend to see things in terms of their own local community, and to have little interest or understanding about the larger world in which they live. One thing a pastor is expected to be, I think, is a window on the larger world, a link to that which is beyond the local community. And most of my clergy respondents tended to indicate that this was true for them. While a number reported that their congregations felt distant from or even alienated from their denomination, in nearly all cases the pastor had closer links. The question is how to communicate these links in positive ways. And here I turn to one respondent, who wrote:

> I have come to believe that smaller parishes can and will respond to global and corporate concerns if this is coupled intentionally with local needs and concerns being honestly addressed and met, so as to encourage a more pluralistic, and inclusive, concept of the Church's mission and purpose to emerge.

There is much need for skills and understandings to make this kind of ministry possible. Many rural (and city) people do not feel the tie to the rest of humanity, or to all of creation, that they might, and so they go on unheeding, seeking only individual salvation. People in rural areas now are being forced to see that they live in an interdependent world, one where all the world's people affect the way they can live, and where nature itself reminds us that we are not free to pursue only our individual desires without heed for others or for the future. They may be the ones to help the rest of the society begin to understand that.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the new theologies assisted people in moving from a feudal to a commercial/industrial culture by emphasizing daily work as a true vocation, through which God could be served. These theologies offered an ethic for a rising class of people who needed guidance in order

to make their daily lives serve the common good. They also provided a legitimation for the place those people occupied in the social structure.

That ethic has been most honored in recent years in rural America, but there are ways in which it has become destructive rather than supportive. "New occasions teach new duties," and these are new occasions. The people most involved in those occasions must be the ones who grapple with the duties demanded there, and with the relationship to God that those duties define. They need assistance in linking their daily life to the faith they have claimed, to studying the traditions of Christianity that may serve as sources for a new, more satisfying, and more constructive life. This is a task for the whole Church, but may be led by those in rural America who are now feeling their vulnerability enough to be willing to search for new answers. Many of them retain the piety that would make them consider their faith to be the right place to look in searching out answers to a new and better form of agriculture in a society whose economic base is somewhere beyond pure greed.

I am convinced, for example, that the emphasis for the agriculture of the future must be not on maximum production, but on what has come to be known as a "just and sustainable" agriculture. That is, we must find ways, economically and politically, to reward practices that improve the land and the general quality of life, rather than simply provide more products that often are already in oversupply. We must find ways, ethically, to honor those who contribute the most to the future of the earth by treating it with nurturing gentleness rather than with violent rapacity. While this is most easily seen in agriculture, it must be extended to all the primary economy--our use of lumber and minerals and metals, our forms of housing and urban expansion, our transportation systems and international relations. Indeed, it is time for a reassessment of our entire culture of modernization, our ideas of progress, and our understanding of the good life. It may be time for rural America, and for the rural churches, to lead the way.