



## Ministry among the People of the Land in the '80s

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“There’s a time bomb ticking out there in rural America today. If it explodes, ripple effects will be far-reaching, perhaps devastating,” reports the generally conservative *Kiplinger Agricultural Letter*.<sup>1</sup> A Minnesota Department of Commerce survey notes that farm foreclosures in the state tripled over the last two years and predicts that 15% of Minnesota farmers are likely to be forced out of business in the next two years.<sup>2</sup> “Banks in rural America are failing at a higher rate than any time since the Depression.”<sup>3</sup> Literally every state with significant agriculture has generated at least one Farm Survival Hot-Line in response to this crisis. “Attendance at farm survival...meetings also has skyrocketed.”<sup>4</sup> The incidence of alcoholism, stress-related accidents and illnesses, family violence, depression and suicide among rural people is increasing at an alarming rate. The Mental Health Center of rural Luverne, Minnesota, reports a 25% increase in suicide calls over the past year.<sup>5</sup> Noting “the tragic rise in rural suicides, especially among middle-aged farmers,” Mark Ritchie of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture in a recent memo to Minnesota pastors entitled “Pastors Alert” states that “case after case of ‘solid, church-going’ farmers committing suicide under the strain of a bad economic situation are surfacing.”

In Missouri the occupation with the highest suicide rate is farming, while some rural Iowa counties are experiencing a suicide rate that is twice the national average.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Kiplinger Agricultural Letter* 55/7 (March 20, 1984) 1.

<sup>2</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, March 14, 1985, section M, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Olson, Chairman of the Agriculture Committee of The Independent Bankers Association of America, in *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, January 8, 1985, section A, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>*Des Moines Sunday Register*, April 15, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>*West Central Tribune*, Willmar, Minnesota, April 30, 1985.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Malcolm, New York Times Columnist, *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Nov. 25, 1984, section D, p. 3.

Although the heavily agricultural states of the Upper Midwest appear to be hardest hit, this is a national phenomenon that is impacting all rural areas. And it is by no means a momentary, passing crisis but one that will likely plague rural America for at least the next decade, according to a U.S. Farm Credit System Report.<sup>7</sup> The further tragedy and irony in all of this is that farmers watch nightly news reports of starving millions throughout the world, while they are told that, because of their efficiency and over-production, we live in a “world awash in grain” and are competing with our allies for our chief grain export market, the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

This is the context for ministry among the people of the land in the '80s. Rural America today is experiencing enormous change, perplexing contradictions, and an extreme amount of

pain. I know this may sound alarmist, for this is not the whole picture. There are also some very good things happening in rural communities. But these are the circumstances and issues that are currently at the center of the rural consciousness, that are impacting the psyche and challenging the faith of rural people.<sup>9</sup> That is why so much of this article will focus on ministry related to those aspects of rural life today. These circumstances challenge many of the romantic notions of rural living that have persisted through the years—most of which never reflected very accurately or completely the realities of life in rural communities. This also means that the rural setting currently provides some of the most challenging and rewarding opportunities for ministry. There is certainly no justification for what some have termed “maintenance ministry” in rural congregations today—if there ever was. I can think of no more meaningful challenge than the challenge to proclaim the gospel amid the pain and turmoil presently confronting these people, to help them maintain the perspective of faith through all this upheaval and change, to help them discover in God’s presence and in Christian community the strength they will need to meet the difficult challenges and make the hard decisions, and to share in the struggle to understand and articulate the tough ethical issues, including the injustices that rural people are feeling today.

Although what is presented here is directed specifically toward ministry in the context of the rural crisis today, this is not intended to imply that what is happening in rural America is totally unique to that setting. Other segments of our society and of our economy have already experienced similar crises.

I have intentionally chosen to draw on a theology of baptism to inform this approach to rural ministry. In my experience the dynamics of baptism are especially applicable to the issues and circumstances of ministry among rural people, particularly in light of what they are experiencing today.

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<sup>7</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, October 2, 1984, section B, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>Barbara Insel, “A World Awash in Grain,” *Foreign Affairs* 63/4 (Spring, 1985) 892.

<sup>9</sup>I take issue with the rather optimistic projections for rural communities, outlined by Merle Boos, “The New Face of Town and Country America and Its Challenge for the Church,” *Word & World* 5 (1985) 43-48. Although today there is significant migration to certain rural areas, this appears to be the case mostly to areas that have resort industries and fairly concentrated manufacturing and “branch business” employment. This is reflected in a recent study of the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs. According to the study, “agricultural counties of the south and west [of Minnesota] lost population as did the mining areas in St. Louis and Lake Counties in the Northeast.” Quoted from the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, March 15, 1985, section B, p. 12.

## I. IDENTITY

Baptism makes a powerful declaration about who we are. “John, Mary, Fred, Martha, ‘child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.’” You have been claimed by God. You have worth and value regardless of what anyone might call you. You have been gifted with God’s grace which no one can take from you. Rural people often struggle with a great ambivalence about their identity and self worth. Most of them want to live in rural communities. They are proud of their community. They possess a real sense of calling to care for the soil and produce food for a hungry world. But they are often made to feel that being from the country isn’t something good. They are often moved to apologize for having an address that nobody recognizes, graduating with a class of 20 students, or living “down on the farm” 100 miles from the nearest shopping center. Note how even today the media often

projects an image of farmers and rural communities as being something less than urban centers. Farmers today know that they must be financiers managing literally millions of dollars worth of investments, expert mechanics operating extremely large and complex machinery, adept market analysts surviving with a minimal or even negative profit margin, expert agronomists and zoologists productively managing thousands of acres and huge herds, and astute executives supervising these many activities. Yet, they are often portrayed as somewhat backward, uncultured, and not quite “with it.” The gospel can address this ambivalence with clarity as it affirms their identity and self image rooted in baptismal grace. It can reassure them that they are indeed children of God. God has blessed them with an inherent worth. They have been gifted. They have a calling that is meaningful and purposeful.

Rural congregations often suffer from similar identity problems. Members love their congregations and make great sacrifices to keep them going. They associate most of their major life events with their congregation. But they frequently feel limited because of fewer members and resources. Sometimes they are led to believe they really don’t measure up unless they “do it like the big churches.” These feelings are often reinforced: by denominational programs and resources that are not designed for the unique needs of small, rural congregations; by large neighboring congregations that are insensitive to the needs of the smaller churches within what E. W. Mueller calls their “killing range”; by pastors who immediately want to change everything according to the latest organizational models, the “right” liturgical practices, or the newest ministry techniques—unwittingly sending the signal that previous practices of the congregation have been “wrong.”

True, rural congregations also need to be challenged to grow and change. But this must be done in such away that it takes seriously their unique gifts and strengths and does not call into question who they are. Sometimes simple things can make such a difference in affirming the identity of these congregations, such as: asking them to host gatherings instead of always going to the big churches; inviting them to participate in the planning of events instead of just extending an invitation for them to come to events hosted by larger congregations; by considering their unique scheduling needs, such as avoiding evening meeting times

for those who have chores, being aware of the extremely busy spring and fall seasons of planting and harvesting, and considering the possibility for some daytime events during less busy winter months; and by intentionally seeking out the unique gifts which they might have to share with other congregations, including larger ones, instead of making them feel that they are too small to have anything to contribute. Many small, rural congregations don’t feel “good enough” to keep a pastor. They often expect the pastor to be seeking another Call in an attempt to “move up” even after very short tenures. They look for signs indicating that the pastor likes them and finds some satisfaction in their community. These congregations need desperately to know that they are of value, not because they are big, but because they have the gospel.

Furthermore, in proportion to their membership, rural congregations have made enormous contributions to the leadership of our church. They have consistently provided strong support for global mission, including relief ministry involving food, clothing, blankets, etc. They usually are close-knit communities that have their own natural networks of communication. They often have developed their own system for getting things done. They usually do not need to be reorganized

or programmed as much as they need to be appreciated, affirmed, encouraged, equipped, and challenged. It is important to take time to discover their particular strengths and unique gifts and to carry out ministry around these. One of the most affirming things new pastors unfamiliar with rural life can do is to let the people teach them—about farming, about machinery, about their community, about their congregation. This is one way of taking them seriously, and it can contribute much to building the trust that is so important for rural ministry. In fact, when this happens I find rural people often more flexible and open to change than their suburban cousins. For example, many have been ecumenical pioneers through their involvement in yoked parishes with congregations of other denominations. They have proved to be more receptive to women pastors than many had anticipated. Many are quite accustomed to the latest theological emphases and pastoral practices because of the young pastors who have served them. This is not to say that we should ignore all the warts and personality quirks which rural congregations have in common with all congregations. But it does mean that we must constantly help rural congregations approach ministry from the perspective of the unique gifts, strengths, and opportunities with which God has blessed them.

Individuals who find themselves personally caught in the throes of the current rural crisis through foreclosure, voluntary liquidation, etc., have their identities challenged in a special way. This is not unlike losing a job, but it is also something more than that. The identity of rural people is bound up with the land, their farms, and their small businesses in a very unique way. Farmers, for example, are often farming land that has been in their families for generations. Frequently their parents have retired early or made other sacrifices to help them acquire the farm. Many have grown up on the land they farm; it is the only place they identify as home. Many have not prepared for any other occupation or even thought of doing something else. Even though they may be quite skilled in other areas, they often don't think of themselves as competent to do anything else. This results in an enormous sense of failure when they lose the farm. They have

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not just failed themselves; they often feel that they have also failed their parents, their own children who might one day succeed them on the farm, and even their community. There is often the sense of having betrayed those who had put their trust in them.

Furthermore, farmers are accustomed to measuring worth on the basis of how straight the crop rows are, how many bushels of corn produced per acre, how clean the fields are kept, and what condition machinery is in. These symbols of worth are all very visible to the whole community, and they are easily measured by everyone. Suddenly the word is out, “they *lost* the farm.” The flip side of the close-knit, supportive community becomes evident. And the sense of failure can be overwhelming, not only for the farmer but also for the spouse and children. These people need to hear the gospel word that their identity and worth are not determined by such a turn of events alone, but by an act of a loving and merciful God who assesses a person's worth in totally different ways.

## II. BELONGING/COMMUNITY

In baptism we are made members of God's kingdom, incorporated into the body of Christ, joined with other Christians of every time and place. We belong! This gospel has special relevance for rural people who often reflect a contradictory understanding of community. On the

one hand, rural communities appear to be very close-knit, supportive, and caring. Rural people have a reputation for knowing what it means to be a neighbor. They have traditionally harvested together, shared each other's equipment, done each other's chores, etc. When there is a crisis they are there immediately with their help, their concern, and their food. They gather in large numbers to participate in each other's celebration and share each other's sorrows.

On the other hand, rural people are also known for their independent spirit and rugged individualism. The traditional example of this has been the inability of farmers to agree on farm policy, to say nothing of farm organizations joining hands to achieve common goals. The relationship between farmers and the small town business community has often been more adversarial than cooperative. Larger towns in rural areas often fail to identify themselves as rural or realize how dependent they really are on what happens to the rural economy. People who are not native to rural communities, such as teachers, pastors, and even spouses, often feel like "outsiders" for years, even though on the surface the community may appear very friendly to them. Usually rural people find it very hard to share feelings, especially those related to failure. They are more inclined to "tough it out by themselves" than to seek help. Farm spouses often bear a special burden as the only ones with whom their husbands feel free to share problems. Frequently spouses must take the phone calls from angry creditors without really knowing how to respond to such calls. Sometimes the opposite is also true: not even the spouse is aware that a serious problem exists.

Because of the above characteristics, and because in small communities everybody usually knows everybody else's business, it is important for pastors to find inconspicuous ways to offer pastoral care. As Michael Massa points out in his helpful study, "In a small, single-celled community, any car parked in

front of the church is noticed, and any *unusual* pastoral activity is just as closely noted. A change in anyone's everyday pattern is a flag to the community that something is wrong."<sup>10</sup> And that close-knit community can feel very oppressive when someone is failing. It is hard to walk down main street in a small town when you know that you owe money to everyone you meet. Furthermore, people who have disagreed with a given farmer's decisions along the way can become extremely judgmental when they discover that that farmer is in difficulty. A special problem today is the fact that some farmers have sizeable equity and little or no debt so they can even lose money for some time on their operation and still survive. Many of these farmers have little understanding or sympathy for their neighbors who aren't so fortunate and are going out of business. Occasionally farmers who are losing their land outbid neighboring farmers to acquire some of that land. It would not be unusual for something like this to have happened between members of the same church council or members of neighboring church councils. As one farmer, who is also a state legislator, told me recently, "If there is one thing the church should be doing, it is to discourage its members from being so judgmental and quick to delight in one another's failure." At stress workshops for troubled farmers the most frequently mentioned symptoms is the overwhelming sense of loneliness these farmers feel.

In recent years this contradictory sense of community has been impacted in other ways as well. As farmers were told that they would have to get bigger if they were to afford the large machinery or survive in farming, their sense of being a neighbor was eroded. Suddenly the

farmer down the road became more of a competitor than a neighbor, appearing to be waiting for the opportunity to acquire his land. The advent of big machinery, with the shift from labor-intensive to capital-intensive farming, meant that farmers didn't need to help each other so much any more. The goal was self-sufficiency. The farmer who farms enormous plots of land does not have time to take turns with a neighbor in using machinery or harvesting crops. With the increasingly large financial investment in farming, banks and rural businesses have also been forced to become more rigid and demanding with their neighbors regarding credit. Good reputation, trust, and personal acquaintance are no longer given as much consideration in making or extending a loan. When the Swift County Bank of Benson, Minnesota, was closed recently—the largest bank failure in Minnesota history—the late president was described as a “compassionate banker” who “habitually paid more attention to a borrower’s character than to his net worth when a credit application was pending or loan payments started coming in late,” and who judged “many a loan application on whether the person would do everything in his power to repay.”<sup>11</sup> Now farm lenders are being advised by their lawyers “to keep an arm’s length relationship with their borrowers” and to avoid “a situation where confidence and trust are placed in a lender by a farmer,” which might make the lender liable for the debt.<sup>12</sup> This is hard to do in a small, close

<sup>10</sup>Michael W. Massa, *Patterns of Pastoral Care in Twelve Small, Lutheran Congregations in Rural Settings in Iowa* (Master of Sacred Theology Thesis, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, 1985) 94.

<sup>11</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, July 16, 1985, section A, pp. 9, 11.

<sup>12</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, June 8, 1985, section B, p. 3.

community where relationships are long-standing. This also illustrates that not only the farmer but other members of small communities as well, are being subjected to extreme stress, loneliness, and alienation. For example, a 1984 survey revealed that 17% of the Iowa bankers who responded to the survey had been physically assaulted, physically threatened, or verbally abused by a farmer in the past year.<sup>13</sup> Today the banker or other farm lender is often the loneliest person in a rural community. Frequently comparisons are made with the Great Depression, with the implication that we've gone through this before and can survive it again. However, one elderly South Dakota farmer, who had gone through the Great Depression, put that in perspective for me recently when he said, “But that was different. We were together then.”

There is, however, a positive effect in all of this also. As the stress and pain intensifies, rural people are finding that they can get help by sharing their feelings and getting support from one another. As support groups form, rural people are responding in surprising numbers. Farmers are discovering with new depth what it means to be a neighbor. They are rallying together to advocate for one another. They are coming to their neighbor's auction, not to get a bargain but to lend their support, and often even to try to stop the auction. Small town business and professional people are becoming more aware of how much their future is bound up with the plight of the farmers. There are even signs of closer cooperation among farm organizations.

Here the church with its understanding of community based on God's act of grace can offer a vital ministry. Through its proclamation the church can help people recapture the sense of what it means to be a neighbor, with deeper meaning from a biblical perspective. The church has members from all segments of the rural community and can facilitate dialogue and help

overcome the tension that often exists between those who farm and those who operate on main street. The church can serve as a catalyst and provide a “safe” place where rural people can come together and talk about their struggles and discover that they are not alone, that they do still have worth, and that they can be accepted in spite of their feelings of failure. Support groups can be developed which draw on the experience of those who have already gone through a similar crisis. Retired people who have special expertise can be called forth to offer help to those who are confronted with very hard decisions. Forums can be held to help create greater awareness of what is happening to the rural community and to provide basic information that is so important in coping with the situation. For pastors to make the effort to be adequately informed is not only essential to their ministries but also a sign that they really care and do identify with the struggles of their communities.

It is important for both the pastor and congregational members to know and watch for the symptoms of depression, suicidal tendencies, family violence, etc., so that they can be prepared to reach out as a caring community. These symptoms include withdrawal, significant changes in behavior patterns, uncharacteristic belligerence or hostility, subdued nature, chemical abuse, etc. Pastors can develop relationships with farm lenders, lawyers, agribusiness

<sup>13</sup>*Des Moines Sunday Register*, March 25, 1984, section A, p. 7.

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people, doctors, etc., who might be willing to indicate when someone could “benefit from a pastoral call” without betraying confidences. Farmers are also very susceptible to serious injury as they operate large and often dangerous equipment while preoccupied with concerns related to the current crisis. Especially during the busy harvest season, a pastor can be helpful by expressing concern for these dangers and encouraging farmers to exercise special caution. A “ministry of presence” which is always important in rural communities is especially important during times such as these. The coffee shop, the post office, farm auctions, farm rallies, etc., are sometimes the best places for ministry to occur. Pastors might also consider inviting such people as bankers, doctors, lawyers, and others directly engaged in resolving rural crises to come together and assess the kind of ministry that is needed.

Congregations should be aware of the added burdens their pastors bear under these circumstances. Pastors generally are very caring people who tend to overextend themselves in taking on the burdens of others. Rural pastors and their families are showing the signs of such pressure and stress. Their need for networks of support both within and outside the congregation could easily go unnoticed during such times.

The baptismal community is not limited to its local or denominational dimensions. It is both ecumenical and global in perspective. This dimension of the baptismal community also has relevance to the current rural crisis. For this is not just a “rural” or “U.S.” crisis. It is a crisis that has serious implications for our entire national economy and our whole society, and it is global in its proportions. From a national perspective, our rural people often feel isolated and even abandoned as they attempt to cope with their situation. From a peak of 6.8 million owner-operated farms and 24% of the total U.S. population in 1935, the number of U.S. farms had declined to 2.4 million in 1983 with only about 3% of the population still actually engaged in producing food.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, rural people feel they have lost the political and economic power to

significantly influence the changes necessary to improve their situation. Outside the rural community they sense little understanding for their plight. They feel they have been subsidizing the national economy through excessively low farm prices, while they are accused of costing the taxpayers excessive taxes because of high farm subsidies. They hear consumers' complaints about the high cost of food, while they realize that they receive only a very small percentage of what is paid for food; that a fair price for their products would not significantly affect the cost of food in our supermarkets; that U.S. citizens pay a smaller percentage of their income for food than almost any other people; and that farmers have been victimized by a national "cheap food policy." The church as a national community is in a good position to help bridge this gap of awareness and understanding between producers and consumers, and between rural and urban people. Many of our urban members, including pastors, still have close ties with the rural community. Some exciting exchange programs are already beginning to take place between congregations, youth groups, and

<sup>14</sup>"Food and Agricultural Policies" (Chapter of the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy), *Origins* 15/1 (May 23, 1985) 3.

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couples groups, including pulpit exchanges between rural and urban pastors. This also provides an excellent opportunity for ecumenical cooperation. Through such ecumenical cooperation the church can model what it encourages to happen between town and country people, between farm organizations, and between rural and urban people.

The rural crisis also provides an opportunity to make people more aware of the global dimensions of our faith community. Many other countries to which we have sent missionaries for years, and in which we now have partner churches, are experiencing similar crises. For example, the increasing concentration of land control and ownership in the hands of fewer and fewer people is something that other nations have already experienced. In fact, as a nation we have tried to counteract such developments in many of these other countries. The national theme of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil for 1982 was "God's Land Meant For Everyone." If such efforts could be shared, we could learn from each other on a global scale and at the same time enhance the global awareness of our people. Our people should be aware that the strong U.S. emphasis on low-priced grain exports as a solution to our farm crisis could have a profound and even disastrous effect on our Third World brothers and sisters as they attempt to develop their own agricultural economies. When we realize that much of world hunger is caused by abuse of land, water, and air, by over-grazing, by deforestation, by inadequate soil conservation practices, etc., we realize again that we can learn much from what has already happened in other countries throughout the world. The church—through its partnership with other churches throughout the world—has the network already in place that can help facilitate such communication and enhance our global perspective on both the church and the world.

### III. FORGIVENESS/RENEWAL

Baptism is also a sacrament of forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal. It is a death and resurrection experience as we are drowned, buried with Christ, and arise in Christ as a new creation. This sets the stage for a lifelong rhythm of dying and rising, of daily repentance and forgiveness, of drowning the old Adam and coming forth as the new person in Christ. This makes

it possible for the community of faith to deal with the blaming, the projection, and the “scapegoating” that can be so destructive of community. This is another gospel word for the rural community today; for there is so much blaming that is presently taking place among rural people.

Farmers are still being blamed for bad management and over-extension of their operations. Lenders are being blamed for calling in loans and initiating foreclosure activity. Politicians are being blamed for lack of action and insensitivity to the problem. The list could go on. This posture not only fails to address the problems, but is destructive of rural community at a time when people so desperately need each other’s support and encouragement. There is also enormous anger, hostility, and frustration under the surface among rural people today. Farmers feel they have been willing to work extremely hard but are given absolutely no control over the marketing of their products. They really

want to feed a hungry world but are stymied by distribution and market structures. They recognize that they helped develop the farm lending system, such as the Farm Home Administration and Production Credit Association, and now these institutions are viewing them more as customers than as partners and are beginning to “bail out” on them.

It is at this point that the gospel can offer another posture, that of confession and absolution. The grace of baptism frees us to confess our own guilt, hostility, and alienation, and have it absolved so that we are once again able to reach out to each other in love. Such a gospel could make it possible for all of us to acknowledge that we have contributed to the present situation: farmers by their greed and covetousness, lenders for their frequent unwise counsel to expand and over-extend, politicians for enacting policies that have primarily favored the large farmers and tax write-offs that have, in turn, encouraged unwise expansion and investment, consumers for their support of a “cheap food policy,” land grant university researchers for focusing on big technology that further encouraged unwise expansion, churches for often remaining oblivious to the problem or hesitant to address the hard ethical questions, and leaders of farm organizations for failing to take the initiative to speak with a common voice—to mention only the more obvious. Instead of pointing fingers, a posture of confession around the throne of grace would seem to be much more healing and life-giving. It would make it possible for us to deal with our guilt and empower us once again to stand together in addressing the issues that are so destructive to every segment of our rural community. It would help us once again open the lines of communication and the dialogue that is so essential if we are to understand each other’s needs in this situation and to work together in meeting them.

#### IV. CALLING/DISCIPLESHIP/ADVOCACY

Baptism also involves a calling, a vocation. Those whose lives have been filled with God’s grace are called to witness to that grace and to serve God’s people gracefully. Those who have been baptized into God’s kingdom are called to live under God’s kingly rule. Those who have been made children of God in baptism are called to live according to the Father’s will and purpose. Those who have been “marked with the cross of Christ” are called to live under the shadow of that cross and bear that cross in lives of faithful discipleship. Those who have been “set free from the bondage of sin and death” are called to oppose the forces of sin and darkness and to be advocates for justice and righteousness.

As much as any segment of the church, rural people have traditionally reflected a strong sense of calling. Certainly this effort has always been imperfect, and we do not want to idealize rural people in this respect. However, they have seen their occupations as the setting and opportunity for fulfilling their baptismal calling to serve God and neighbor. In Luther's words, this is the context in which they can be "little Christs to their neighbor." This is especially true of farmers who have consistently understood themselves as "stewards" of a precious resource entrusted to them by a gracious God. For them farming has been more than a job. It has provided them the opportunity to exercise their Christian calling by caring for the soil, faithfully "tilling it and keeping it." This

is beautifully but painfully illustrated in the words of Ed Hauck of Millville, Minnesota, when he commented after watching the destruction of his carefully developed conservation practices at the time that he lost his land to an insurance company: "It hurts me more the way they're working the soil than that I lost it."<sup>15</sup> For people such as Ed, farming is much more than a business; it is a calling.

That sense of vocation has been eroding among rural people in recent years, and it is being challenged today like seldom before. The church has a vital ministry to help rural people recapture such a sense of calling and to address the difficult ethical issues that are causing such "erosion." For example, land is viewed increasingly as nothing more than "real estate" and investment, a hedge against inflation, or a tax write-off. Instead it should be viewed as a trust from God, a source of food, or, in the familiar words of Joseph Sittler, "the placenta of life."<sup>16</sup> The produce of the land is now referred to as commodities to be used for speculation and even as weapons more than as food and fiber to feed and clothe one's neighbor. Instead of viewing land as a place where life can be lived, faith can grow, and love can be shared, the move is away from "family farms" and toward "factory farms." Those who have a long term commitment to "a way of life" are being replaced by those who want to realize a short-term profit. And it must be clearly acknowledged that farmers' greed has contributed as much to this distortion of values as have outside investors and speculators. The unwillingness of the consumer to share the cost of good conservation practices along with other bad economic conditions is forcing farmers to abandon such practices in order to survive economically.

If there is a positive aspect in all of this, it is the fact that rural people are being challenged to re-examine and recapture some of their most basic values. Farmers are beginning to recognize that the scale of their operations has been getting out of perspective, and greed has been part of that. The various segments of the rural community are once again beginning to recognize that interdependence and the need to support each other as part of the same community. They are becoming "neighbors" to each other again. Some are beginning to see justice concerns in a totally new light as an important part of Christian discipleship, something which has not generally been characteristic of rural people. Marty Strange has noted that "farmers have not associated themselves with previous social justice movements." Therefore, "they can expect little help from groups that otherwise might be politically helpful to them....Farmers need to realize that justice does not mean just us."<sup>17</sup> It is important to recognize that the church is usually not equipped to resolve tough economic and political issues. But the church must provide vital assistance in addressing moral and ethical issues. As one farmer put it

recently, “It is important to me that I am helped ‘by the church’ to a better understanding of the issues.”

<sup>15</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, May 17, 1985, section B, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Sit tier, in an address delivered at an Ecumenical Farm Event, March 9, 1985, Madison, Wisconsin. Distributed by the Wisconsin Rural Development Center, Box 504, Black Earth, WI 53515.

<sup>17</sup>*National Catholic Reporter* (April 12, 1985) 17.

The church can also provide assistance by helping farmers broaden their understanding of vocation, to help them discover that there can be “life after farming,” that they can exercise their Christian vocation in other settings and through other occupations. In other instances, this might mean providing the strength and faith needed to continue in their present occupation, to keep raising the important ethical and faith issues in that context, and to help bring about the change that is needed. The church must also help rural people keep their perspective in general amid all these enormous changes, some of which are inevitable.

Again, the church can be a catalyst, provide the setting, and offer the encouragement so that rural people can raise the key ethical issues and address issues of injustice. Among the most critical issues, soil conservation practices designed to preserve this precious resource is surely one. Farmers are expected to practice good soil conservation measures, but a national cheap food policy prevents them from passing the cost of this on to the consumer. Under the present price structure farmers are not able to recapture the normal cost of production, to say nothing of the cost of good conservation practices. Or, what does it say when we advocate for land reform in Third World nations while farmers are being driven from the land in our country? Should we allow such a vital resource as land to become controlled by a very few? If studies consistently show that family farmers are the most efficient food producers and that they demonstrate the best care of the land, do we simply stand by as the trend away from family farms continues? What will happen to the cost of an adequate supply of food when a few large corporations come to own most of the land? Is it true, as Bishop Maurice Dingman of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Des Moines has suggested, that “When the corporations take over, they will sell food like General Motors sells cars. Food will double in price by the year 2000 if we lose our family farms.... When you take the land away from the people you sow the seeds for revolution?”<sup>18</sup> What does it really mean to “own” land anyway, when “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”? How do we reconcile our modern concept of ownership with the biblical understanding of being “stewards” and managing the land as a “trust” from God? Is it fair when farmers are encouraged to plant “fence row to fence row,” as they were in the ’70s, and then get penalized for overproduction? An important part of the church’s rural ministry involves raising such key ethical questions, not only for rural people but for our entire nation.

## V. HOPE

Baptism is an eschatological event. Through it we are incorporated into a kingdom which extends far beyond the limits of our own lifetime. It is a kingdom which does not ignore the harsh realities of this life, but its consummation is also not bound by them. The sign of this kingdom is the cross. Those who are baptized into this kingdom live under the shadow of that cross and also “bear its mark forever.” That cross becomes *the sign* of their hope.

There is an enormous sense of loss that rural people are feeling. In many instances they have lost their homes, their land, their neighbors, their institutions, much of their community, their jobs, etc. They need a hope that is real to help sustain them.

If there is one thing that rural people repeatedly request from the church today, it is a word of hope. They recognize that the church does not have the expertise and should not be in the business of designing the policies, the technology, or the economic strategies to resolve their crisis. But they are looking to the church to provide that hope which can sustain them in the midst of their crisis. This dare not be a word that simply ignores that crisis. It must be strong enough to help them deal with it. Rural people have already had their fill of the false hope that comes with empty promises. They have been told for over a decade that everything would get better if they would just hang on for a couple more years. It is not getting better and it won't for quite some time. They have been told for decades that if they got bigger they would be the ones that would survive. Today the big ones are falling as hard as the little ones. They were told that bigger machinery and newer technology would make them more efficient and therefore economically more stable. Today implement dealers are going out of business as fast as farmers and farm auctions are not covering the remaining balance on machinery mortgages. They were told to plant fence row to fence row so they could feed the world. Today they can't sell their crops because of overproduction, and starvation throughout the world remains a serious problem.

In circumstances such as these, to live under the shadow of the cross can take on new meaning. To remember our baptism with the sign of the cross as we gather for worship can be life giving and hope restoring. It can be faith renewing to hear a cross-centered gospel that reminds us that God often works most powerfully in times of weakness; that God is often most present in his "hiddenness"; that God reveals himself even in his apparent silence; and that out of death comes life.

For some farmers this will need to be translated into the affirmation that "there is life after farming." For others this will be translated into the strength of God's presence, even if it appears to be his "hidden" presence. For still others it will mean the faith to endure enormous change that they do not want to see but which may be inevitable.

It is important that such hope also be reflected in our liturgy. Our prayers in public worship should regularly include such concerns and point to such hope. Family liturgies can be developed to help families make transitions from their home and farm to new settings and new opportunities. This can help them bring closure to this part of their lives and empower them to move on. As Chuck Pierson, a farmer from Truman, Minnesota, stated recently, "Sometimes I think we need to get a grasp of the spiritual before we can tackle other problems. More than I trust the land or the bank, I trust the Lord. Even if I lose my farm, I'll still have my family. I think I could find a new job. If my hope remains rooted in God and God's promises, I have something to look forward to." May such a hope, rooted in the faithfulness of God's promises, always remain at the center of our rural ministry.