Word & World 11/2 (1991)

The Environmental Challenge in Rural America

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By the second week in August, it was dry. The ground had split and left wide cracks in the wheat fields. It was time for rain. Then late on a sultry Friday afternoon, black storm clouds boiled out of the southwest sky with streaks of eerie green and white, an indication of hail. Hailstones on the golden fields waiting for the combine would be devastating. I called our son, Kent, on the farm radio, "Watch the southwest sky, Kent, I'm praying for rain with no hail."

That evening, we sat at the kitchen table and rejoiced that a beautiful rain had indeed come. "But Mom," Kent said, "You prayed the wrong prayer this afternoon. You should have prayed for smashing hail. My hail insurance would have paid the crop expenses. Combining and hauling the wheat to market with the present price structure means that I lose—lose badly."

Wheat produces bread, a gift we take for granted, a gift that helps feed a hungry world. We know the joy of a slice of whole wheat toast with morning coffee, and those wonderful buns for our kids' hamburgers. Do farmers have the right to pray for "smashing hail"?

I. REASON TO BE AFRAID

These past few months have meant disappointment and anger as family food producers—the true land environmentalists—have again lost in our attempt to create a sensible piece of farm legislation that could mean the difference between survival or failure for both farm families and the land itself. In 1983, when I "left the farm" to become the Assistant Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Minnesota, there were 103,000 Minnesota farmers. In 1989, when I "left state government" to go back home, there were 90,000 Minnesota farmers—a loss of 13,000 families. Those losses meant closed rural community businesses, hospitals, churches, and schools. And families continue to leave.

The President's signing of a new farm bill in November 1990 has only gener-

ated new fears in the heartland. United States Senator from South Dakota, Tom Daschle, said at a press conference:

> The 1980s were the worst period for farm income since records have been kept....States such as South Dakota...have experienced declines in real net farm income up to 60% since the 1970s. The Congressional Budget Office has projected that the continuation of current farm policy would mean a decline in net cash income of almost 30%, causing the exodus of another 500,000 from agriculture.[1]

Senator Kent Conrad from North Dakota said on the Senate floor, "The farmers in my state are still recovering from two years of crushing drought. Wheat prices have plummeted. And now Congress gives them a farm bill that guarantees another wave of bankruptcies, foreclosures, and pain across the heartland."[2] A recent National Farmers Organization report lists statistics like these:

> — From December 1989 to November 1990 milk was down $4.45 per hundred weight—annual loss to farmer producer $6,541,500,000.
> — From May 1990 to October 1990 hog prices were down $17.00/hundred weight—annual loss to farmer producer $2,470,182,000.
> — From May 1990 to October 1990 wheat prices were down $1.11 per bushel—annual loss to farmer producer $3,044,000,000.
> — From July 1990 to October 1990 corn prices were down 65 1/2 cents per bushel—annual loss to farmer producer $5,253,000,000.
> — Washington budget cut in farm bill, 13.6 billion—annual loss for next five years $2,720,000,000.
> — Grand annual loss to farmers, December 1989 to November 1990, was $21,891,632,000.[3]

Farm families have a reason to be afraid! Especially when the squeeze also comes from the expense side. In light of the war in the Middle East it is significant that United States Department of Agriculture economists predict that farmers must spend $900 million more for fuel and fertilizer for every $5.00 per barrel increase in crude oil.[4]

II. WHO WILL TILL THE LAND?

Gen 2:15 keeps drumming in my head, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." An old Chinese proverb says the best fertilizer for the land is the footprint of the farmer. Somehow many have forgotten the strength, economic stability, and caring for creation that families on the land have given this great nation. Fewer tillers to "till it and keep it" means the loss of hands-on caring for the precious gift of land. Our son, Kent, represents the fourth generation on the Kanten farm. When I watch him walk hand in hand across the farmyard with his six-year-old son, Jim, I know he's preparing the fifth generation. Little Jim's eyes sparkle and his whole face grins when Dad says those

[1]Washington press release from the Office of United States Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, July 19, 1990.

[2]*Senate Congressional Record*, October 25, 1990.

[3]From the National Farmers Organization periodical, *News, Facts, Outlook* 2/7 (Fall 1990).

[4]As noted by Keith Collins, economist, United States Department of Agriculture Research Service, "The Iraq Conflict," *Farm Journal* (October 1990).

wonderful words, "How about a round in the combine?" It is such families who live on the land and love the land who will preserve it for the next generation.

Yet as a society we have been caught up in an American dream of growth and efficiency

that has turned to a nightmare for many. In agriculture survival was and still is in many ways dependent on volume and growth. The universities and agricultural extension services shut out the disobedient, but gave extraordinary assistance to those who complied with the message to "Get Big or Get Out!" Growth assumed success; success assumed efficiency; efficiency assumed comparative advantage and lower prices. But we must begin to look at the implications of the demand for "more"—more production, more consumption, more exploitation of the earth's resources—for our heartland and for all of our global neighbors.

The logic of growth as solution, or its corollary, consumption as liberation, cannot be sustained. United States agriculture and rural America is in danger of becoming an example of the failure of this ideology, for we see today both the erosion of our land and water resources and the erosion of our rural culture and family farm system. In the erosion of our land and water resources, the ecological damage is immense. As an inch of topsoil takes at least two hundred years to be created, we are eroding our land at rates three to five times as fast as we can replace it. About one-half of the fertilizer we now use is to replace nutrients lost through this erosion. Of course, this recognition of our delicate balance and dependency on the earth is not new. One of the most significant global investigations of soil erosion and care, undertaken by W. C. Lowdermilk at the request of President Roosevelt in 1938, discovered that soil erosion, deforestation, overgrazing, neglect, and conflicts between cultivators and herdsmen have helped topple empires and wipe out entire civilizations. At the same time, it demonstrated that careful stewardship of the earth's resources through terracing, crop rotation, and other soil conservation measures, has enabled other societies to flourish for centuries. Today we face another major threat to our land and water resources, unforeseen by Lowdermilk, in the massive use of inorganic chemicals and artificial fertilizers.

To the erosion of land and water resources is added that of rural communities. Jim Nichols, Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Minnesota, wrote in a recent letter to Senate and House Agriculture Committee members that the 1980s have produced the worst farm crisis in the fifty years since the depression.

> More than 1/2 million family farmers have been forced from the land. Some 100,000 Main Street businesses closed. Tens of thousands of rural schools and churches shut down and over 600 rural hospitals ceased operating. We now see a migration from rural America into the cities of the U.S. In 1986 and 1987, over 750,000 people left rural America.

In her book, *Poverty in Rural America*, Janet Fitchen chronicles how rural people have been unable to prevent the eventual social and leadership disintegration that accompanies such migration from small communities. In the face of a literal shrinking of population, businesses, services (schools, churches, health care, human services, mental health care, etc.), economic base, tax base, and employment opportunities, the 1980s have seen the beginning of a restructuring of rural America similar to the massive changes that followed the depression of the 1930s. There is a tremendous human cost to this restructuring. While it has been labeled a crisis—which has short-term implications—the effects of this problem are long-lasting.

III. A NEEDED SHIFT IN UNDERSTANDING

I believe that our analysis and understanding of environmental issues is beginning to shift. Sustainable agriculture has become a key concept in the United States debate over farm policy. Environmentalists, politicians, and academics are all getting involved. Technological and scientific emphasis has begun to move away from the ideology of "more production, no matter what the cost" towards a more comprehensive cost/benefit analysis which includes total social and environmental cost. However, government policy has not been reformed to provide economic support for the transition to these more environmentally-safe farming practices. Economic pressures to produce more for less continue and often make environmental choices difficult for a farm family.

The next few years will bring issues of creation into sharp focus, as threats of the cumulative ecological crisis make creation a top priority. Our economy will be forced to move away from consumption of non-renewable raw materials and energy sources such as coal and petroleum to rediscover renewable creation—agriculture, forestry, fishing—as our primary source for most of our energy and other basic needs. Those same corporations who now control the petroleum, coal, and uranium resources, and who are poisoning and wasting our creation, will move quickly to capture control over renewable resources. They will promise us that this time their practices will be "sustainable," but the real issue remains: Who will have the power to decide the fate of renewable creation, of the earth, water, and seas? Will that power be shared by the people in a democratic way? Or will it be shared by a handful of companies in what we call monopoly capitalism?

If that decision-making control remains democratic, then we can re-orient the production and harvesting of this renewable creation to be sustainable and decentralized in every part of the globe where the sun shines and where water runs. If it is monopolized, however, corporations will most likely choose to produce or harvest these resources in a non-safe, non-renewable way. Just as is the case today, control will be highly centralized, and the fruits will not be distributed widely. If corporations control the seeds, the land, and the water, they will continue to control creation—just as surely as they do now.

As a nation of consumers concerned about safe food and safe and adequate water, we should be a nation concerned about the whole creation and about maintaining farm families to be the stewards of that creation—principally the land. We need to see the land as "placenta"—so George Sittler called it—the gift responsible for all life.

Our total national policies, however, are now geared only to the philosophy of "competitiveness" in the international market which is reflected in the following statement: "American farm programs should be refined to reflect that America's economy has been weakened and the country needs to make its agricultural exports attractive."[5] To adopt such free trade language when the "playing field" is not equal in such areas as tax law, environmental law, workers' compensation, labor costs, and energy costs, would, according to Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture, Jim

[5]Gary Gunderson, *Agri-News* staff writer, quoting G. Edward Schuh, Dean of the University of Minnesota Humphrey Institute and Dan Pearson, policy analyst for Cargill, *Agri-News* (November 15, 1990).

Nichols, "place the price of raw agricultural products on whatever the back of the poorest peasant can bear."

IV. HAVING A SAY ABOUT POLICY

In November of 1986 farmers went to the city to share our story at a Land Conference on the Urban/Rural Connection at Riverside Church in New York City. The words of Walter Brueggemann's keynote address still ring in my ears.

> In Genesis 47, Joseph bought up all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. That is, the state had already gained a monopoly. The Israelites gave their money and their land and their cattle and their bodies to Pharaoh in order to get bread....The Bible calls them "slaves" but they did not become slaves by whips and brutality, but by the slow erosion of economic independence through tax policies until none could resist the power of the monopoly. Israel's house of bondage is to be understood economically. Before they became slaves, we may speak of "peasants" who live close to the land and who eat what they grow off the land....The situation of the peasant is put in crisis when the urban establishment no longer operates with a respecting "give and take" with the peasants, but by policies of usurpation, confiscation and taxation begins to seize surplus produce in order to sustain priests and scribes and wisdom teachers who cleverly justify the monopoly....The monopoly thrives on the productivity of peasants....dispossessed who lead desperate lives, always at the edge of the economy, utilized for monopolistic values of the city but without benefit or value or dignity.

Those words speak for many in the farming community today. We are too often considered "peasants," easily manipulated by the wisdom and sophistication of the city policy makers and educated economists. For instance, all four major farm organizations objected to the 1990 farm bill, which was, nevertheless, passed on October 16, after expelling the public, in closed-door session. I have always been proud of being called a farmer, steward, or even peasant on the land, but Brueggemann's words frighten me. I do not want to be called a "slave."

Gentle conservative farm families have had too little to say about closed door government policy, international market forces, or the growing power of contract farming—even though they are destroying us. Part of the reason is our passive, "next year will be better if we work harder" attitude, our just plain faith and hope in the miracles of birth and growth that have always sustained us as farmers, and a naive belief that, because we are the producers of food, this nation would certainly not betray us. But agricultural policy has betrayed us as farmers, as rural communities, and also betrayed the very food security of this nation.

And this should be, must be, a concern for my church. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, fifty-four percent of our congregations are in open country or in communities of less than ten thousand. These strong roots have been the life-blood and stability of the gospel mission in the heartland. Our plea is not to be forgotten by a church whose presence is such an important part of our lives. Yet now when our future is at great risk, much of the rural church feels forgotten. We seem not to be on the "ELCA Issues" computer list of priorities. It is

disappointing when a “Kairos” continuing education seminar at Luther Northwestern Seminary to discuss issues of land use, ecology, and the environment, and how they affect rural life, as well as to explore ways for the message of the gospel to address these challenges, had to be cancelled for lack of interest.

We can’t address a problem if we don’t know or understand what the problem

is. Agricultural policy is complicated and complex, but church leadership and pastors must be informed and in a caring way begin to understand. We need more programs like that at the ELCA’s Wartburg Seminary, which has made rural ministry a top priority, with programs and connections to rural congregations that give students a positive, exciting vision of what it means to be in ministry in a country setting. The result can be to draw to seminaries more students with a rural background and a faith commitment to return to rural communities.

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” As a nation, as a church, and as farmers we have the responsibility to care for God’s gift of creation and to see that those whose lives are committed to that care are justly and fairly treated.

Much of the heartland was blessed this summer with rains. We are grateful for a wonderful harvest; *but what if the rains had NOT come?*