



# A Vision for Rural America

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**O**UR ABILITY TO SHAPE THE FUTURE DEPENDS IN PART ON OUR VISIONS OF the future and our understanding of where we are and how we got here. Visions have an important basis in religious history. Native Americans have visions that connect them to land, to each other, and to the Creator. For a community of faith, narrative is particularly important, because it gives us a sense of a shared past. Through the liturgy we share the Judeo-Christian heritage of the wandering, the searching, the moving toward a vision. Liturgy also provides a sense of the present and presents the possibility of alternative futures. In this essay, I will lay out two “what if” scenarios. One will be, “What if we keep going as we are?” and the other, “What if we build on the assets and the people and the place to move forward?”

The European Americans who came after the Native Americans, often displacing them, also had visions—perhaps narrower ones. Some envisioned agriculture as it was in England, Germany, or Scandinavia. That past practice from a different place did not generate a sustainable agriculture on the harsh and arid en-

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*Current trends in government, market, and society will continue to bring decline to the quality of life in rural America. But change is possible—change that risks defining and moving into an alternative future.*

vironment of the Great Plains. Their struggle to impose that vision yielded human suffering and inappropriate treatment of the land.

## I. INSTITUTIONAL TRENDS

Visions are linked to action when we tell them through narratives and stories. And actions bring change when they are incorporated into institutions. Institutions are critical to the way we frame our past, present, and future. Plato laid out three important institutions that frame the individual's response to societal forces: the state, the market, and civil society.

The *state*, government at all levels, from international—such as the World Trade Organization (WTO)—to national to state to local, is a series of institutions that sets and enforces the formal rules. The government has a social contract with its citizens to attend to the common good. The *market* is the series of economic relationships that come about as we interchange goods and services for a price, though it can also include barter. It always involves exchange that is negotiated between buyer and seller—recognizing, however, that the negotiating power of one may be much greater than that of the other. *Civil society* is comprised of formal and informal groups of citizens that mediate between the market and the state. Churches are part of civil society, bringing the question of values to both government and market institutions.

### 1. Government

Devolution (or decentralization) and privatization are major contemporary trends in government affairs. Worldwide, governments, particularly at the federal level, are saying, “Well, we can't afford this issue, and we aren't very effective in solving the real problems of people's lives, so let's give it to local governments.” All of us have seen this occur in rural communities. Things that the federal government once did, states are now supposed to do—e.g., welfare programs—but then the states in turn pass this on to the counties.

The problem with devolution is that people are given the responsibility but often not the resources. With devolution local governments, which in rural areas are run by volunteers (a very interesting intersection between civil society and government institutions), are suddenly taking on huge responsibilities.

Privatization means that things that were once considered to be part of the social contract between state and citizen are being moved to the market, generally in the name of efficiency. That may be the case, for example (if political pressures are not part of the negotiating procedure), when the state hires a private firm to build and run prisons. The efficiencies of privatization cause some to wonder about continued equity of access for excluded members of society—for example, when recreation, parks, and education are privatized.

### 2. Civil Society

Polarization is a current trend in civil society. Rapid economic change, along

with increased diversity in income, race, and ethnicity, are frightening to many people. Sometimes such people seek a single solution to the complexity of present problems. This can produce significant hostility. Fewer people are willing to run for public office, particularly at the local level. Many of those who do run are single-issue candidates. They seek to achieve a single goal—stopping the teaching of evolution in the schools, for example—and do not pay attention to the other parts of governing needed to create and maintain healthy schools and places.

With such polarization, people who do assume public responsibility are often bombarded with hate mail, making them want to resign or not run again. This polarizing aspect of civil society has major implications for the state.

### *3. The Market*

Two key trends in the market are globalization and what I call post-Fordist industrialization. Fordism was the standardization of production brought by the assembly line, which created many products exactly alike of a guaranteed quality. Post-Fordist industrialization still produces guaranteed quality, but products are made to end-user specifications, using technology like CAD (computer aided design), which allows machines to be rapidly retooled to meet the exact specifications of the user.

Globalization brings, first of all, increased competition. There are more and more players in the market, producing greater supply and lower prices. Thus, all commodity prices are low. Rural Americans think primarily about the low prices of wheat, soybeans, corn, and various other grains. Beef prices are low, and hog prices are way out of sync. But, other prices are also depressed. Oil prices in 1998 and 1999 were as low, in real terms, as they have been since the '20s. Copper and timber prices are low. All of these prices are low, in part at least, because of the greatly increased competition brought about by globalization of the economy. Only when there is some sort of supply control, usually initiated by market institutions (as in the case of oil, where the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC] limited supply at the end of 1999) or partnerships between state and market institutions (as in the case of sugar in the United States) have prices risen or been maintained.

Thus, commodity prices—by commodities I mean all of these raw materials that we use to make other things—are down. When commodity prices are down, profit margins get razor thin and the only way to compete is by volume. So a farmer raising commodities must raise more and more and get bigger and bigger in order to survive. These are not economies of scale, since often the small producer can be as cost-effective per unit produced as the large producer. But it is only by producing more and more of a commodity that sells for less and less that a producer can make enough money to continue in business.

Low profit margins lead to the next thing, which is the consolidation of enterprises. We are seeing huge consolidations among oil companies, the media, pharmaceutical companies, and seed and agro-chemical companies, among others.

Farms are getting larger, and the number of operators smaller. Such consolidation brings an enormous increase in negotiating power, especially since the government in this time of devolution is declining to regulate in this area.

The *Baltimore Sun* recently published a depressing investigative report on chicken producers who work with integrators—the only way you can raise chickens these days, particularly in the south and the east. These farmers have no recourse with regard to their contracts. They cannot negotiate the terms that are in the contracts or even enforce the terms that are there. Every time farmers try a legal tactic or collective action, the power of the very few slaughter plants ensures that they lose. This may be a harbinger of things to come for the pork industry.

Post-Fordist industrialization shifts from producing commodities to producing products—products with controlled means of production and particular specifications regarding taste, convenience, and price. People who have found ways to produce quality ingredients for very specific products—rather than commodities—are pockets of optimistic survival in agriculture. We now see farmers joining with community members to form new alternative value chains. But so do multinational corporations, who own land and water rights, manure distribution rights, hogs, trucks, packing plants, and distribution networks.

Post-Fordist industrialization brings decreased numbers of linkages between producers and consumers. In the Fordist system, beef cattle can have as many as six owners before they get to the packing plant. The folks who are doing the cow/calf and the stocker/feeder operations are managing the *resource*—the complex interaction between the ruminant, uniquely able to utilize feed stuffs that are not digestible by non-ruminants, and the land. They figure out how much grass, how much pasture, how much corn stover, how much autumn wheat they have available, nature willing, and plan their number of animals accordingly. It is a very complex interrelation among humans, animals, and the environment. On the other hand, the packers and the folks who own the feed lots are managing the *market*. That is easiest done by ignoring nature and separating cattle from it in feedlots. These produce huge amounts of manure in one place and require corn, which is often irrigated, thus using up the ground water. Now folks are trying to shorten those value chains, because at every step, each owner takes a cut. Shortening the value chains in the proper way can accrue more to those early producers who manage the natural resource.

As a citizen, I have a great interest in the people who are managing and protecting the environment. I am much more interested in that piece going well than I am in whether feeders and pack yards do well. The struggle between those managing the resource and the packers, stockyards, and feed lots has gone on for a very long time. The history of beef production in this country shows the market concentrating control, while civil society organizes to promote justice, encouraging the government to care for the welfare of people in the sector of agriculture.

Industrialization also results in the separation of management from owner-

ship. There are companies in Iowa that manage half a million acres. In this case, the land is not owned by foreign individuals or corporations but by the heirs of farmers, living in Florida and California, whose major concern about the land is their quarterly check. This kind of management encourages consolidation and short-term profits. Linkages between rural and urban churches could provide contact between managers and landowners in a way that could raise questions of joint responsibility that go beyond a merely financial interest.

The present economy has brought a decreased number of core firms in the packing industry. The number of core firms has decreased in steel, car manufacturing, and grain processing as well. But the number of outsourcers is increasing, people who supply little pieces to those core firms.

## II. A DIFFERENT VISION

This is the setting—the present in our story. One vision for society’s future is more of the same. But in the Bible, vision implies change. And for change to occur, civil society has to become more involved and more active—not only in telling congress what the government should do, but also in forming faith-based enterprises. And that is happening. One example is the formation of church-to-church distribution networks, where rural churches link with their urban counterparts, thus shortening the value chain between producers and consumers.

Vision requires that we know where we are going. In that regard, I would like to draw on the President’s Council for Sustainability and talk about the three “e’s”: environment, equity, and economy. Equity is the hardest of these to measure. Frankly, it is difficult to get people interested in equity these days. We can get people quite concerned about the economy. But if they think about equity at all, they fall back on the statement, “A rising tide raises all boats.” Yes, but if it is a tidal wave, a lot of small boats get sunk. Some people can get mildly enthusiastic about ecosystems and the environment, but they think it is inefficient to talk about equity. Concerns for justice are thought to take us away from our *real* business, which appears to be making sure that profits accumulate very rapidly for stockholders.

A biblical vision includes healthy ecosystems. We are to be stewards of the land. That concern is linked to intergenerational equity. We want to be sure that what we do today does not limit the opportunities of our children and our children’s children. At the same time we are also concerned about intra-generational equity, which requires that we do not have a large number of very poor people and a few very rich people. Social equity would give everyone equal access to his or her congress people, where calls would be answered regardless of economic status.

Communities—communities of interest and communities of place—are absolutely vital to achieve a vision of equity, environment, and economy. All communities have resources available to them—human capital, social capital, natural capital, and financial capital.

*Human capital* is contained in individuals. It includes formal knowledge ac-

quired through degrees and informal knowledge acquired through experience. It involves health, values, and leadership. Understanding and respecting the diversity of the human capital in a community is critical for a vision to be reached.

Second is *social capital*. Social capital involves mutual trust, networks of reciprocity, and shared symbols. Social capital provides ways of interacting, identifying ourselves communally—by what we do, how we believe, and how we treat one another—rather than identifying ourselves by what we consume. A collective identity implies a shared future. What happens to you matters to me. This ability to share joy in each other’s success is an important part of social capital.

Next is *natural capital*, including air, soil, water, biodiversity (plants, animals, soil microbes, etc.), and landscape. A sociological truth requires the necessity of naming something in order to act toward it. We can impact something unintentionally, but unless we name it, we can’t take intentional action toward it. Take air, for example, which we tend to take for granted: rural air is good; urban air is bad. But the situation is more complex. We produce greenhouse gases at an alarming rate, contributing to global warming. We pave things over, eliminating the carbon sinks we need to maintain air quality, reduce flooding, and protect water quality. Naming the realities involved with air permits informed action.

We don’t even know about the extent of the earth’s biodiversity. We may be destroying an invisible living world that is critical for our survival. We need science to help us name that world—and values to help us appreciate it. Landscape involves what we see, how we relate to it, and our necessary feeling of space. Do we feel comfortable with a chaotic environment, such as that provided in nature reserves or even shelter belts? Or do we require order—lots of the same thing in straight rows?

I grew up on a desert, so when I moved to Kansas I found it to be really green. Then I moved to Virginia and thought, “This is *too* green.” While visiting us in Virginia, my father-in-law, who farmed in Kansas, said, “I feel a little closed in here in Virginia. The trees block the view.” Our sense of landscape, our relation to the land, contributes to our sense of identity and is part of our social and human capital.

*Financial capital* involves money and its many instruments: stocks, bonds, tax abatements, derivatives, mutual funds. It is important because you can build things with it. You can construct school systems and roads. You can double your parking lot size and build an extra wing for the Sunday school. Financial capital is very useful, but only if it is viewed as a means, not as an end. Vital economies do not require huge rates of growth; vital economies generate a way for everyone to earn a living with dignity and to meet their needs rather than their wants.

We have good human capital in rural America. In the north central region, we believe in education and we have invested in it. So, we have a wealth of human capital available. However, we also have a problem, because our model of creating

financial capital is based on the notion from the 1950s and '60s that what we really need is jobs.

The biggest barrier to economic vitality in rural America is lack of labor. We lack the needed labor force, in part because our model of development focused on bringing in low-wage jobs. Not surprisingly, the folks we trained so well have left for greener pastures. However, people can change that. In South Dakota, for example, a farmer set up a dairy cooperative, trying to take advantage of the social capital; but the members didn't think very hard about human capital. As a result, they paid only \$7-\$8 per hour and found that they were only able to attract students and others who couldn't find any other kind of job. Their dairy manager, whom they brought in from California, said, "Get me a good labor force or in three days, I will call my contacts in California and I will have some very hard working, excellent, experienced Mexican workers here." I hope the response was not due to racism, but the farmers who owned the co-op decided to offer \$10 an hour, and they don't have a labor force problem anymore. By providing quality jobs at decent pay, they solved this major problem.

A second economic problem in rural America is the lack of housing. I just finished a study of the impact of bringing a large integrated industrial hog operation into rural Oklahoma. We found that the local, state, and federal governments found it more convenient to invest their financial capital in the corporation than in building housing for the workers. They wanted to create jobs, and they did. But that meant that the cost of housing in that county increased dramatically. The failure to invest in housing for the large number of new workers resulted in a decline in per capita income, an increased crime rate, and a rise in the number of civil suits filed. While retail sales shot up, the number of retail stores remained the same, as "big box" stores replaced local small businesses. Consumer loans went up, while business loans went down.

The corporation couldn't get any of the small producers who raise beef to integrate with them, so they became completely vertically integrated, building their own confinement operations and hog lagoons on land they purchased. They claimed to be agriculture so they could be exempt from anti-pollution and nuisance laws, and they claimed to be industry so they could get all the industrial incentives. A lot of manure lagoons were constructed with industrial revenue bonds.

In this case, the state (federal, state, and local) invested public dollars in a market effort that will probably have negative impacts on equity, definitely negative impacts on the environment, and variable impacts on the economy. The role of civil society in such situations is to understand that any change has winners and losers, and to make sure that the most vulnerable, particularly those without a voice through the market or the state, are not irreparably damaged in the process.

Our vision for the future of rural America is based on our incredible capital base. That human capital base involves people who have been here for a very long time, Native Americans. It involves people who have been here a pretty long time,

including century farmers around the area, and it includes people who have been here not very long, who are often of Hispanic origin. These various groups are assets, not problems. In my vision, we come to understand the resource these people provide and our potential to move them up occupational ladders so they can replace the skilled labor force that is about to retire in our areas. They can be part of a dynamic community where, in terms of built capital, we will no longer have shuttered main streets and a few big box stores outside of town (so the corporations don't have to pay city taxes). Instead, we will have a main street that is vital and operating.

They will not necessarily be doing what main streets used to do—selling goods—but they will be providing services. We will see day-care centers and elder-care day care—sometimes together. There will be an appreciation of the different cultures that are increasingly coming together in rural communities.

We will be electronically connected so we can overcome the disadvantages of distance and dispersion, allowing us to build our own nuclei of market activity rather than merely recruiting branch plants. Entrepreneurial farm community partnerships will be an important part of that market activity. Farmers will no longer grow only corn and soybeans but use their incredibly rich soils to grow a wide variety of crops. They will constantly change what they produce, because community institutions will help them find emerging new markets. People will find that they are eating a lot more of what they grow directly rather than sending it out to other countries where the cattle are fed and then sent back here.

In my vision, our environment is in much better shape. Flooding has decreased because we understand that we don't have to pave everything to improve our quality of life. Since we are no longer exporting as many raw materials, we no longer need to put more locks on the Mississippi River. The channels are running freer. There is less siltation. The movement of the river is more natural, so it is better able to hold water.

Water quality is increasing, because we understand the ability of nature to deal with problems of nutrients when the water is allowed to stand where it is. Urban people are beginning to realize the importance of agriculture and rural areas, not just for providing food and fiber but for providing air and water. They are willing to pay for that benefit to the ecosystem as well as appreciate the quality ingredients that come through specific products.

The farming of the future will be among the most intellectually challenging of professions. Our new knowledge of plant genomics and specific microbial soil diversity will allow farmers to plant varieties that build on the local ecosystem, rather than attempting to overcome it. As we finish the genome mapping projects and are able to move genes more quickly, we will be able to move toward boutique crops. Alternatively, we can move to boutique crops through the seed saving that is already practiced by some farmers. People will be producing a lot of different things that will retain their identity from the field to the end-user consumer. Some people



will want genetically modified organisms; others will not. We will be able to provide both, because we will have the organization at the social level that allows this to happen.

### III. A TIME FOR CHANGE

In agriculture, farmers produce what they produce—a few commodities with very low prices—because we have established a series of institutions that support producing those commodities. Federal farm programs are based on a few commodities, elevators that do not segregate crops, and commodity associations that focus on producing more and more at less and less cost.

If we keep doing what we are already doing, we will get more of the same. With more of the same, we will face serious problems. Our human capital, social capital, environmental capital, and economic vitality are all at risk. Change is required—constant change.

Many of us are not very comfortable with constant change. We find it easy to make the non-risky shifts, like changing our brand of toothpaste or our variety of soybeans. But changing our farming system is a risky shift. Risky shifts threaten our comfort, but they might also mean that local businesses work to connect farmers to markets in new ways.

My vision for rural America is one of constant change. It is a vision of constant growth. It is a vision of constant learning. It is a vision where we learn how to relate better to the land, to each other, and to God. ⊕