



## What Future for Rural America?

**D**ATELINE: MINOT, NORTH DAKOTA, JANUARY 13, 2000. THE EYE OF THE RURAL storm. Ground zero. Statistics confirm the mounting threat to town and country living: school closings, population migration to urban centers, plummeting commodity prices for wheat, barley, and livestock.

But the North Dakotans on this panel speaking to seminary students were extolling the treasures of doing ministry in Postal and Crosby, Rugby and Ross. The state legislator spoke of gifts: the gift of time to walk from office to home for lunch, the gift of space shaped on a human scale and known, the diversity of activities available to rural kids. The economic developer detailed ways small communities are attracting businesses by using opportunities brought on by crisis—a lighting company, for example, paying a dollar for a previously unused building.

Pastor Jerry Erickson reported an interview with Wes Jackson who was asked a question corollary to that which entitles this issue of *Word & World*. The interviewer asked Jackson, “Is it possible to retrieve community in this country?” Jackson: “Not only is it possible, it is essential....We need to find a way to assure food production in a way that is beneficial to the whole fabric of society....Otherwise, by losing rural culture we will be losing our cultural seed stock....We can reverse the loss by digging in wherever we are, digging in with affection. Living for your people. Being there. Becoming native to that place.”

Finally, former Bishop Bob Lynne invited the seminarians: “Our people are too important for just anybody. Our people deserve the best. So, come on out to Western North Dakota. Come on out and assure us, with all our ups and downs, that God will not abandon us. Come on out and challenge us. We lose focus. We think we’re about survival. But we’re not. We’re about being the body of Christ in mission.”

So, what future for rural America?

That is a live question, as the essays in this volume attest. The majority of them—Marty, Simon, Flora, Gruchow, and Andrews—were initially given at the 1999 Rural Ministry Conference of the Center for Theology and Land sponsored by Wartburg and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminaries. That conference topic was “What Future for Rural America?” Hall presents at the 2000 Conference; Jung’s essay was given at the Charis Summer Theological Institute, Moorhead, Minnesota, and at Iliff School of Theology; Marshall’s was also presented at Iliff. Goreham’s essay was presented to the Evangelical Covenant Church

conference in Chicago. We appreciate the freedom and direction offered by Fred Gaiser of our sister seminary and by the Editorial Board of *Word & World*.

There pervades these essays a sense of struggle with the questions of the future that we want in rural congregations and communities. The tension persists: What future for rural America?

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