



Toward Wholeness and Community: Strategies for Pastoral and Political Response to the American Rural Crisis

DAVID L. OSTENDORF

Prairiefire Rural Action, Des Moines, Iowa

For decades, Americans have quietly and unobtrusively been displaced from the land, victims of public policy, “progress,” and poor profits that have combined to drive millions of families out of agriculture and into other livelihoods and locations. The steady decline of the farm population over the past fifty years is well-known and widely accepted as an “inevitable consequence” of technological advance and extraordinary productivity. Depression era images of poor, uprooted farm families on the move have long faded from our collective memory as the nation moved into an era of post-war prosperity and abundant, cheap food produced by fewer and fewer farmers.

The benefits of that prosperity were denied millions of poor Americans—many of whom themselves were displaced from the land, never to recover economically—and they overshadowed the longer-range socio-economic costs to rural America. Among those costs was a quiet, unseen, and insidious rural crisis that brewed across the countryside. On occasion, it emerged publicly when the nation was graphically reminded of the “people left behind”—the striking title of the Johnson Administration’s report on poverty in rural Appalachia. American agriculture sometimes made the popular press, particularly if the vagaries of weather threatened crops and food prices, or if farmers made good with foreign grain sales, hit the skids with embargoes, or loudly protested low commodity prices. For the most, though, the quiet crisis simply persisted unnoticed.

By the early 1980s, however, a lethal combination of low farm prices, high interest rates, ever-mounting debt load, and declining net worth finally began to cripple American family farm agriculture. Forced farm sales reached epidemic proportions, especially in the nation’s heartland, and the economic impact of the failing farm economy was felt far beyond the farm gate. By 1985, the “quiet crisis” exploded onto the national and international scene as thousands of farm families were threatened with liquidation and refused to take their plight quietly any longer. Economic, social, and political upheaval marked many rural areas of the nation; massive farm protests were organized as a wave of activism swept

the people of the land. The crisis on the farm and across the countryside was suddenly *very* real and *very* immediate.

Today that crisis is still pervasive, and it is likely to intensify. Unquestionably, American agriculture is in a period of profound and wrenching transition, the effects of which will be felt for generations in the countryside and in the cities as well. Farmers, small businesses, lenders,

ag-related factory workers, and entire towns struggle for survival against mounting odds, and life in much of rural America is now characterized by the breakdown of relationships and the fracturing of community. Moreover, as farmers and their neighbors organize to exert political pressure for social change—a step that must be taken to equalize power relationships now skewed against them—the crisis atmosphere is often exacerbated.

It is into this complex mix of socio-economic and political issues and impacts that the rural church is called today to creative and liberating ministry. The contemporary American rural crisis requires of the community of faith new (and renewed) approaches to pastoral and prophetic ministry among the people of the land, and beckons us to act politically that justice might be served among our people and among the people of the global community.

The task will not be easy or simple, for as a community of faith, we, too, carry all the baggage of a society that ever cheers success, disdains failure, and rejects challenge to its *status quo*. Moreover, as E. W. Mueller reminds us, the church “lacks a doctrine of adjustment to social decline...and finds it difficult to minister to people when economic life, family life and community life fail.”¹ Still, by grace, we seek to restore wholeness to broken people and communities; to empower those who suffer; and to renew covenant with broken land as a gift from God.

I. STRATEGIES FOR PASTORAL RESPONSE

I am withdrawing from people more and more. That isn't good I know, but I can't help it. I have taken so much hurt, I don't know if I can take any more, and the best way to avoid that is just stay away from people. I don't have very much to say to anyone any more....Don't worry about me, I am tough. I will make it with God's help. If I was going to crack up, I would have done it long ago. I decided I wouldn't let them beat me, and I won't let them beat me now. I just wish at times that God would provide a post *for* me to hang this awful burden on *for* a while.²

The crisis in rural America has taken a severe human toll. Beyond all the numbers, statistics, and analyses are the women, men, and children who face the devastating loss of generational ties to the land, and the realization that they have no future there. The displaced and dispossessed are forced to take up life anew, and those who struggle to survive face prospects of ever-mounting financial pressures. Uncertainty about the future and stress associated with the struggle for survival put family, neighbor, and community relationships on edge;

¹E. W. Mueller, “The Holy Earth: The Church’s Involvement in the Rural Life Movement,” *grapevine* (Joint Strategy and Action Committee, September, 1983).

²Personal, confidential correspondence to the author from a farmer, spring, 1985.

rural neighborhoods and towns are no longer shocked by news of strained and broken marriages, spouse and child abuse, or alcohol and drug abuse. The shattered sense of independence, coupled with the feeling of powerlessness and loss of control over life, readily leads to withdrawal and apathy. Grief and depression over threatened or impending loss of a farm, business, or job is no longer uncommon, and in too many cases has led to suicide. Growing frustration and pent-up

anger fuels the threat of violence that seems to brew underneath the pain of people pushed toward the edge.

The tension within families, high as it may be, is often exceeded by the tension among families and individuals whose relationships have deteriorated and polarized as a result of the economic crisis. Farmers, lenders, and business people who lived in relative harmony are now frequently pitted against one another in a fight for survival; differences of decision-making once settled by dialogue and a handshake are now turned over to attorneys.

On top of all this, it is not unusual to hear disparaging remarks and criticism by government officials, lenders, other farmers, and even church leaders who contend that those farmers in trouble are simply “poor managers,” the “over-extended,” or those who really shouldn’t be farming anyway. Thus falling into the classic trap of “blaming the victim”³ for problems not of their own making, many stand back in judgment on those who suffer, and thereby lay the groundwork for increased polarization.

More often, perhaps, the church has simply ignored or overlooked the plight of its own people, or has been unable to move beyond the awkwardness and difficulty of dealing with the economic loss and personal pain suffered. There have been, of course, harsh church reactions: the struggling farmer who acted as church council president, and who was asked to resign his position because his Chapter 11 bankruptcy did not reflect well on the congregation; a prominent church leader who, with his successful, monied farmer-friends, decided not to buy land in their area until they had driven the price as low as possible, in order to expand their own landholdings cheaply. There are many others like them who care little about those displaced from that land, or who believe that “the church shouldn’t be involved” or help those who are unable to “tough it out” like they did in hard times.

The church’s response to this crisis (and others) lies in its ability to deal better with the issues of death than with the struggles of life. In rural areas, in particular, death or disaster bring quick response from the community to the victims. A deadly storm, a fire, or the natural death of a family member engenders widespread church and community support. Within hours, shelter, food, and clothing are provided, or the kitchen table of the grieving family is laden with casseroles, pies, and cakes. But let that same family lose its farm or small business, and measure the response. There may well be none, for indeed, as Mueller suggests, we do find it difficult to respond in ministry to those *life* situations that represent economic failure and social decline. It is, in short, the story of a farm couple who attended the same church for thirty years and, when they went broke, were not visited by the pastor or any church member.

³William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

As we develop strategies for pastoral response, it is crucial that we first recognize and understand the broad economic and social dimensions of the rural crisis, so we are able to respond appropriately, effectively, and non-judgmentally to its manifestations in our daily ministry. Put simply, we need to know both the cause and the context of the problem if we are to recognize and respond to its symptoms.

Because the symptoms themselves may not be highly evident, the rural church must be a strategic “listening post,” a detector of sometimes faint and subtle signals from families reluctant or unwilling to speak openly of their financial and personal pain. If we are cognizant of the oft-

prevailing tone of judgment and victim-blaming in our midst, or of the propensity to overlook the problem, we should not be surprised that those deeply affected by the crisis fail to flock to the doors of the church for guidance and help. We erroneously assume that because there is no demand for such help, there is no problem “out there,” while, in fact, we ought to be assuming that *every* farm family and ag-related person may be facing some degree of difficulty. We must see through the denial.

Among the symptoms we should be watching for and listening for are:

- withdrawal from activities, apathy, loss of interest in others
- not attending church; not contributing time and gifts
- expressions of loss, hopelessness, signs of grieving or depression
- tension and stress reflected in physical appearance or conversation
- talking in veiled terms about the rural crisis or making light of it
- saying that everything is going well; nothing is wrong in their operation
- coming forward with a presenting problem (marital issues, questions about how to locate an attorney, etc.) that masks a deeper concern about their situation
- aggressiveness and acting-out behavior, including the behavior of children in affected families
- noticeable loss of self-esteem, self-worth, giving up
- family conflict and tension; coolness in family and community relationships
- any signs of suicidal behavior.

Even though one works in an area of the country where the farm and rural crisis may be “legitimized,” i.e., a topic of open discussion, press and action, it should *not* be assumed that an atmosphere of “acceptance” of the broader crisis will enable people to come forward to discuss their own problems. After years of working with farm and rural families, it is still not uncommon to hear a person get up in a large gathering of troubled rural folk and say, “I thought I was the only one in trouble,” or “I didn’t want anyone else to know.”

The church, then, must seek to bring the suffering and loss of persons and communities out into the open, and provide a place and a framework for it to be confronted and acted upon. In short, we must continuously help surface the issues that most of our people would rather deny, and we must intentionally reach out to those who suffer to let them know we do care for them and their future. There are numerous ways to carry this out:

- by providing opportunities for people to gather and talk about the crisis, e.g., in adult classes, other church gatherings, and in support groups
- by sponsoring or providing information on education and training events on crisis-related issues, farm crisis meetings and workshops, and encouraging attendance
- by opening up the doors of the church to such meetings and events
- by making more regular and frequent pastoral calls on farm and rural families
- by using the church’s policy positions on farming and rural life as a basis for discussion of the issues
- by working ecumenically with other churches to sponsor workshops on the rural crisis

- by having farm and rural families tell their stories, especially those who have suffered and are able to share their story effectively with others in a public setting
- by providing information on sources of help available to farmers, including legal and financial assistance and counseling, contacts with farm advocates and crisis hotlines
- by being present at farm sales and auctions to show support for those who are losing their livelihood
- by participating in farm organizing meetings and rallies
- by accompanying farm families to meetings with their lenders, especially if there is considerable tension in their relationship
- by helping mediate disputes between farmers, small businesses, and lenders
- by putting affected families in contact with other families who have been through similar situations
- by preaching about the crisis and its impacts and implications
- by providing basic human needs—food, utility payments, etc.—to those with little or no ability to pay for them.

One anticipated outcome of surfacing the issues and pain is an increase in pastoral counseling with affected individuals and families. In providing such counsel, we should first recognize that the return to wholeness cannot take place outside the boundaries of the many “systems” that are impinging on the lives of those persons, such as the community itself or the financial relationships of which they are a part. Secondly, we should recognize that persons facing or anticipating the loss of their farms are grieving. Thus, we should be fully prepared to:

- deal with the shock and denial of loss; personal disorientation; disbelief and grief
- help move beyond confusion and inability to confront the problem(s)
- help move beyond the immediate problem, e.g., impending loss of the farm, in order to secure assistance from knowledgeable persons such as farm advocates and attorneys, or families who have been through similar problems

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- help deal with their guilt: “It was my fault...”; “I shouldn’t have...”
- facilitate clear recognition of the parameters of the situation, and the exploration of options that can be exercised to resolve the problem
- find strengths and provide hope; move them to concrete action: who and where are persons and groups that might help them reach resolution or move on with life after their loss.⁴

These and other strategies for pastoral response in this time of crisis should *not* be construed as ends alone, but as part of a more comprehensive approach by the community of faith to empower people to exert more control over their own lives. It is simply not enough to restore persons to wholeness without facilitating their participation in community and in efforts to *change* the institutional and systemic relationships and powers that may have led to their personal crisis in the first place. Helping victims cope is not enough; we must, as well, help move our people into “political” strategies for change, recognizing that personal wholeness restored is

but a prelude to community responsibilities fulfilled in the quest for justice.

II. STRATEGIES FOR POLITICAL RESPONSE

In an incisive article on expendable rural communities, Harland Padfield reminds us that coping

is implicitly passive or adjustive in orientation and internal in focus. It implies adjustment to, or, at most, the manipulation of, constraints as opposed to breaking them. It is implicitly apolitical in terms of being either vague about external power relationships or accepting of them. Coping can be anything that enables one to survive, including invalidating the experience of oppression and identifying with the oppressor.⁵

Padfield goes on to argue that “without political consciousness, adaptional theory...handily reinforces the moral authority of the existing political and economic institutions that dominate if not totally control social environments.”⁶

Nurturing political consciousness or engendering political strategies does not come naturally or comfortably to the community of faith. The very *notion* that the church is or should become “political” can generate instant conflict and controversy. The political journey with our people in rural America today may shake the *status quo* and some of our most fundamental and deep-rooted beliefs about how our economic system works. It is a journey that forces us to recognize our tendency as church to “countersign rather than counteract”⁷ those powerful

⁴Here I am indebted to Joan Blundall, whose groundbreaking work in Iowa with farm families in distress has led to creation of counseling paradigms now being used across the nation. Blundall is currently on the staff of the Northwest Iowa Mental Health, Spencer, Iowa, where she continues to work closely with farm families.

⁵Harland Padfield, “The Expendable Rural Community and the Denial of Powerlessness,” *The Dying Community*, ed. Art Gallaher, Jr., and Harland Padfield (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1980) 170.

⁶Ibid.

⁷E. W. Mueller, “The Holy Earth.”

economic forces that grind our people under, and to face the possibility that we may have been totally remiss in fulfilling our prophetic role in the world.

The political journey of which we speak is one of *empowering people* to move toward *equalization of power relationships* with the political and economic institutions that do, in fact, exercise control over their lives. It is providing the tools and the opportunities for people to stand up against those powers on equal footing, and to exercise their own collective power to change the policies and practices of those institutions. It is, for example, providing information to a farmer who borrows from the Farmers Home Administration that he or she has the right, under established rules and regulations, to defer or reschedule loan repayments, and to appeal adverse loan servicing decisions by the agency. It is getting that farmer together with other farmers to discuss and develop a plan of action to pursue when the agency does not abide by its own established operating procedures. It is facilitating contact between those farmers and their congressional representatives and attorneys, and then moving with them into the court system with a class action lawsuit that they win. It is providing opportunity for those farmers to tell the

story of their success, thereby empowering others to take action together to change other institutions.

The challenge inevitably arises about our “meddling” in such affairs or “taking a stand” with people, and the church will incur the wrath of some institutions that do not take lightly the questioning of their authority. The real challenge to the church, however, lies not in the reaction of those institutions or people who identify with them, but in wrestling with the implications of the gospel message that calls it to liberating action in the world. As Walter Brueggemann writes in his book on land,

It is likely that our theological problem in the church is that our gospel is a story believed, shaped, and transmitted by the dispossessed; and we are now a church of possessions for whom the rhetoric of the dispossessed is irrelevant. And we are left to see if it is possible for us to embrace solidarity with the dispossessed.⁸

“To embrace solidarity with the dispossessed” is, indeed, at the very heart of the political journey we are called to in the midst of the current crisis in the American countryside. While our action takes many shapes and forms, it is, and must be, rooted in a commitment

- to minister with and empower the dispossessed, including those who have “gone down already,” those who are on the edge, and those who are threatened with impending loss and continuing deterioration of their farm operations;
- to prevent further displacement of people from the land and from rural communities, and to rebuild, recreate, and strengthen community in rural America;
- to create a vision of a just future with and for the people of the land, and to help create that future with them.

⁸Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 194.

Strategies for political response coming out of this commitment move us in many directions leading to empowerment of people and to their equalization of power relationships with the institutions and systems now so dominant in their lives:

Education and training. It is critical that our people first understand the current crisis, its causes and proposed solutions, and that the church play a role in providing that education through workshops, seminars, and training events. The Iowa Inter-faith Human Needs Commission, for example, has conducted such training events with clergy and lay leaders across that state. through, its “Living on the Edge” conferences, which begin with a comprehensive overview of the development of the crisis and conclude with presentation and discussion on action strategies to confront it. Such training should also include:

- examining the biblical understanding of land and the covenant relationship between God, the people of the community of faith, and the land;
- an understanding of the historical development of the crisis, especially since the post-World War II period, along with the development of federal and state policies affecting agriculture in the U.S.;

- techniques of rural community organizing and mobilization for effectively dealing with the crisis locally and beyond, with special emphasis on changing institutional and public policies adversely affecting farm and rural families;
- providing information on farmers’ legal rights and responsibilities, and on the policies of various lending institutions, as well as on options farmers have to liquidation of their farming operations;
- individual and organizational sources of technical assistance, information, and legal advice;
- understanding the linkage between the crisis and other issues of social and economic justice in our society and in the global community, e.g., the rural crisis as a manifestation of the continuing concentration of control over land and other resources globally;
- breaking down stereotypes that have culturally divided rural and urban/ metropolitan people from one another, and prohibited their working cooperatively on common concerns.

Education also involves the church in “naming the names” of those institutions and agencies that are wielding power and control over the lives of people and the welfare of communities, and helping people understand ways by which those powers might be challenged. It is identifying public policies that should be supported or defeated, depending on how those policies enhance or destroy family farm agriculture and the rural community, or whether they lead to more displacement of people and the concentration of land in fewer hands..

Advocacy. Churches in many states have provided strong support for crisis hotlines that offer farm and rural families credit, legal and technical information, advice, counseling, and referral, and that provide volunteer and/or professional advocates to families in severe need of assistance. These hotlines have been important sources of direct help to families hard-pressed by lending institutions and agencies, and have enabled them to secure information that, indeed, has

put them on equal footing with those powers. Moreover, churches have encouraged families to act as “farm advocates” in statewide hotline networks—people to whom other families can be referred for additional assistance, support, and guidance.

Advocacy by churches has also involved clergy and lay leaders in meetings between farm families and lenders, especially when their intervention might help mediate or resolve disputes or impasses between the parties. We know of numerous cases where the participation of the church in such disputes has resulted in new levels of dialogue between the two parties, and in resolution of conflicts that prevented settlement of differences. This has been particularly true in those situations where the farm family has not had information or opportunity to gain equal footing with a lender who might be exerting heavy pressure. Some of the most hostile lenders have taken *very* different approaches with their farm-borrowers once the church has made its presence and support known.

Organizing. Churches are increasingly becoming more involved in local and statewide organizing with farm and rural families, as they attempt to build their “political” voice for change in public policies and institutional practices. Doors of churches have been opened to local farm

organizing meetings; clergy and lay leaders have become actively involved in support efforts for organizing campaigns; and the institutional church has become a working partner with many of the grassroots organizing efforts underway in rural America. Farm support groups that have sprung up in countless states are often church-based and church supported, providing educational opportunities and emotional support to families, and a strong base of people to address policy issues. Linked across the state and even across regions, these locally-organized groups have become the very backbone of the contemporary “farm movement” that has swept the countryside. Nationally, churches are being explicit about the need for local congregations and judicatories to become active in organizing efforts rooted in the development and implementation of non-violent strategies for social change and economic justice in the American countryside.

Coalition-building. Along with increased organizing activity, churches are playing a vital role in bringing together diverse groups to address the rural crisis. In Iowa and other states, ecumenical agencies and judicatories have been strong participants in statewide farm, labor, church, and urban coalitions that have been highly effective in changing public policy, organizing in rural areas, and building a statewide political presence on rural/farm concerns. The church is also instrumental in ongoing efforts to cement ties between rural and urban people, in order to enhance the political voice of rural citizens in state capitols. and in Congress.

Leadership development and support. Providing opportunities for farm families to “tell their story” is an act of empowerment and leadership development. The most powerful witness to the impact of this crisis on people is that given by those families directly affected; “telling the story” is empowering for those who do it and for those who listen, and it is out of such opportunities that leadership often develops. The church needs to encourage and support its people who do take leadership positions in farm organizing efforts and in coalitions and other groups attempting to confront the crisis. Moreover, the church needs to identify

potential political leaders in its midst and encourage people to run for political office regardless of party affiliation.

Public policy. The church’s work in the public policy arena needs to be strengthened on farm and rural issues, at both the state and national level. Policy issues must be analyzed, supported, and promoted on the basis of their contribution to maintaining a diversified system of owner-operated farms and on the basis of keeping family farms on the land in economically viable operation. The church should also help assure that its membership in the U.S. is informed and mobilized to support these policy objectives.

One of the most effective strategies for achieving this goal is through the church’s participation in organizing and coalition-building among its rural members, thereby empowering them both to develop and to promote their own public policy alternatives and objectives. It is through the strength of such grassroots organization that the phone calls, letter-writing, and visits to elected officials have the most impact, and the most potential to change policy. It is, as well, through this organizational mechanism that elected officials and candidates are given the powerful message of the strength of their constituency on key issues that might, in an election, mean the difference between victory and defeat for them.

Public witness and direct action. As involvement by churches in rural organizing activities has increased in recent years, so has the level of church participation in public

demonstrations and actions, based on non-violent approaches to social change. Churches, for example, have been involved in farm rallies, farm sales, peaceful demonstrations at state capitols, lenders' offices, government agencies, and in direct efforts to negotiate debt repayment settlements for farmers. Clergy and church leaders have become highly visible and vocal in their support of families in distress, and have thereby brought to the attention of the community the legitimate plight of those people. One of the most effective symbols of the resurgent farm movement has been a white cross planted by the hundreds on lawns of court houses, held by farm and rural families at farm rallies and demonstrations, and symbolizing the loss of rural America and the hope of the people for the future. The ministry of presence by the church in these very public, very visible, events has strengthened the resolve of people and organizations to keep up their struggle for economic and social justice in spite of the odds sometimes stacked against them.

Use of church resources. The church needs to examine the way it uses its own land and money resources in rural America. How is the land owned by the church being used, by whom, and at what price? When church land is sold, to whom does it go: a young, beginning farmer at a fair price and financing level, or to the highest possible bidder? How is church land being farmed with regard to soil conservation measures? What is being done with the massive amount of church investment funds at our disposal to assist farm families, or to invest in rural banks? These and other questions about the use of our own resources are important for us to wrestle with as we consider strategies for political change in rural America. The changes we seek ought to begin with a serious look at our own practices.

Toward a regenerative agriculture. As difficult as it may be, the church also must begin to lift up challenges to our people on the manner in which we now farm. High-tech, chemical-dependent agriculture cannot be indefinitely sustained without growing economic, social, and environmental costs to the society. The church is one institution that can and must call upon its people to consider the broader moral and ethical issues inherent in the way we farm; in who farms the land; and in how and by whom the land is controlled. If we come out of this period of severe crisis in rural America without having made significant movement on this set of issues and the development of a sustainable, regenerative agriculture, we will have lost the opportunity of a lifetime, and abdicated our responsibility for the long-term in exchange for short-term economic gains and the continuation of a boom-bust phenomenon in American agriculture. The church must not only fight for economic and social justice, but also fight for the vision of a just future for the people of the land engaged in *agriculture* that will assure the availability and wise use of the land for centuries to come. This, indeed, is a volatile political strategy for change, for here we are challenging the most fundamental practices and beliefs of not only the economic and political system, but of many of our people themselves.

“To embrace solidarity with the dispossessed...” This is, indeed, the challenge that lies before the church as it struggles to confront the contemporary rural crisis. The struggle ahead for us will not be easy. For at least the duration of this decade, we are going to confront this rural crisis; and well beyond that, we are going to have to engage the debate over farm, food, and land policy in this nation. We must act; we must develop and carry out a wide range of strategies for pastoral and political response with and among our people.

To be silent and passive these days is to abandon and dismiss the people with whom we work and live, and whom we depend on, in rural America—the people who seek to live on the land and provide food and resources that sustain the society. To be silent and passive these days is to ignore those among us who are dispossessed, who are losing their land and their livelihood. To be silent and passive these days is to turn our backs on the people of the countryside who seek to organize with one another and, in organizing, to express their voice and take more control over their own lives and futures. To be silent and passive these days is to dismiss a religious heritage that has sustained and nourished generations of people who believe that God acts, and continues to act, in history, in the struggle for justice. To be silent and passive these days is to break the embrace of solidarity with the dispossessed....

We must act...to restore wholeness and community to our people and our land; to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to minister with and empower the dispossessed; and to build creatively a world where justice might prevail on the land and among its peoples, restored to wholeness and empowered for justice and community.