

Pronouncement on the Crisis of People and the Land
A Pronouncement Approved by General Synod XV (1985)

SUMMARY

The fabric of rural life is being affected by the changes taking place in the relationship between people and the land, and between farm families and the rest of U.S. society. Events threaten to end forever the vision our society has had of widespread ownership of agricultural land by productive, working farm families. The proposed pronouncement affirms the Christian commitment to social justice in rural and agricultural life, and calls for a public response to the crisis of people and the land.

BACKGROUND STATEMENT

The relationship between people and the land from which they gain their sustenance is among the most important relationships in our society. Many of our forbearers left their homes in distant places to seek a new world that offered an opportunity for people who worked the land to enjoy the rights and responsibilities of owning it. They formed covenants among themselves, securing the privileges of private property, and adopted policies designed to provide the opportunity of ownership to as many as possible. Out of their experience emerged a social and economic institution—the family farm—in which was vested both economic rights of enterprise, opportunity, and property, and the social responsibilities of stewardship, productivity, and sharing. Current conditions experienced by North American farm families reflect a collapse of this relationship.

It is no irony that the fragile shape of the family farm exists despite a splendid record of productivity in agriculture. An exaggerated emphasis on production without concern for the social use of the product or the welfare of those who produce is now punishing the North American farmer.

The current crisis is the result of both private and public actions. For a brief period in the 1970's, world-wide shortages of food and economic conditions at home and in the rapidly developing world, encouraged the notion that there would be strong demand for export crops, especially grain, from the United States. Declining prices, rising costs, heavy debts and the exceptional strength of the U.S. dollar overseas combined, however, cause acute financial stress for many farm families. This stress has caused severe emotional upheaval as families whose lives and homes are indivisible from their farm's struggle to survive. As the family farm disappears, land ownership concentrates. Farmers' inability to meet their financial obligations threatens their neighbors who run businesses to which the farmers are indebted. The fabric of rural community life is torn by the conflict that marks the troubled relationship between debtors and creditors. They are often friends and neighbors. They are sometimes members of the same rural congregations.

The tearing of the social fabric of North American rural life is accompanied by threats to the land itself, as erosion eats away at the earth and the environment is endangered by the introduction of pesticides and chemicals intended to enhance production. Meantime, fewer and fewer citizens remain close enough to the day-to-day experience of farming to understand these issues or to appreciate their importance to the larger society.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the Biblical account of creation, God intends harmony between human beings and the rest of nature; a harmony expressed in and blessed by the productivity of the earth. However, as a result of sin, that harmony has been destroyed. This estrangement from nature has resulted in willful misuse of the land.

Still, land is seen as central to God's covenant with people; central to shaping of human community; central to relationships of justice among all peoples who dwell on the earth. Caring for and living in harmony with the land, therefore, have been important visions for the people of God; promises of God which have been fulfilled in Christ, the New Creation, in whom the unity of all creation lies.

Because Christ is the bearer of the New Creation, He is the mandate for the people of God to take with divine seriousness the care of the land. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the people of God, with a committed sense of stewardship, to stand with and assist those who work the land. The Biblical demand for justice and the rightful payment of just reward impels us to speak and to act.

STATEMENT OF CHRISTIAN CONVICTION

In light of the crisis visiting the people and the land, the Fifteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls for a public response which affirms the following principles believed basic to the concept of the family farm;

The culture of the land expressed in the practices of farming constitutes a community of values that transcend economic objectives. The relationship of persons to all creation, the care of the land, and the ways of family life and human culture in rural areas should be nurtured and sustained.

Ownership of agricultural land should be widespread among farm families to assure a democratic character to rural communities as well as a vigorous use of agricultural resources.

Farming should provide a meaningful opportunity to earn a decent living, and acquiring farmland for speculative purposes only should be discouraged.

Stewardship of natural resources is both a legitimate public policy objective and a responsibility of land ownership; farmers therefore, should practice soil conservation and the public should support their efforts to do so.

In commitment to these principles, the Fifteenth General Synod recommends the following goals for farm policy:

Undertaking measures immediately to address the imminent bankruptcy of farm families, exercising as much care as possible to offer people a second chance at productive farming without validating those economic choices that have deepened their problems and made them critical;

Developing policies designed to stabilize agricultural prices and farm income in order to promote a fair return to those who farm the land;

Encouraging farm programs that are long-term in nature and discouraging the dangerous “boom-bust sequence” of recent years;

Advocating strong measures of federal, state, and when appropriate, local governments, to remove from production highly erodible land.

Supporting public and private actions now to encourage and affirm the entry of new farm families on the land;

Eliminating tax and other policies that make attractive the exploitation of human and natural resources, or which favor investments in farm land by high income individuals and those who do not depend on farming for their living.

The purpose of these recommendations, when taken together, is to redefine the social covenant between people and the land and between farm families and the rest of society. The purpose is to affirm the Biblical vision of the just use and care of the land. It is to express concern for the crises exploding around the family farm. It is to stand with those who seek to inform themselves about the problems faced by agriculture in the United States, who engage in public dialogue in an effort to find solutions, who minister with compassionate understanding to the people of the land wherever possible, and who take those actions appropriate and necessary to the achievement of these goals, ever faithful to the church’s vocation on earth as witness to the Shalom of God.