

“THINGS ARE WORSE NOW THAN WHEN WE FIRST BEGAN TO MEET”

At a meeting of the Saskatoon Diocesan Pastoral Council in February 2003, much time was spent on the problems facing the rural people. The comments were sorted by Catholic Pastoral Centre Staff under four action headings, communications, education, prayer and advocacy.

The prayer component has been addressed by the Liturgy Commission with one part being the Farmers' Way of the Cross used in some parishes last year.

The advocacy committee has met four times a year, and at its seventh meeting, the above statement was made by one of the five farming people on the committee of twelve – all with an interest in assisting the rural people in their survival in this province.

The work of the committee has often included both communication and education, yet there remain huge gaps in understanding and support for the plight of rural communities.

A. KEY FACTORS IN THE FARM CRISIS

1. Increased cost of farm machinery and equipment. These do not necessarily evoke sympathy among city based people.
2. Agribusinesses by their size and limited numbers are able to control world prices and world markets.
3. Changing weather patterns within the country and within the province.
4. Crises in the cattle industry caused by BSE and drought.
5. Difficulties in competing in export markets which are government subsidized.
6. The diversity of products across the country and within the province preventing farming people speaking and acting with one voice.
7. Philosophic differences about seeking support in the political arena.
8. Transportation factors - cost and services.
9. Related costs, such as in chemicals, rise in step with increases in the selling prices of farm commodities. But they rarely decrease.
10. Alternative forms of food production, e.g. organic farming, lead to disunity in the farming community.
11. Taxation of property needs both a reassessment and a change in philosophy.
12. Economies of scale and improvements in productivity on the farms have not produced improved returns for farmers in general.
13. Few alternatives for positive change are available to rural Saskatchewan people.
14. Generally, city dwellers are ignorant of and or uncaring in regard to the problems of rural society. They see little if any relevance to the way they live.
15. The farmer's return for his product does not rise with the consumer price of food.
16. Partly because of falling population and current bank policies existing farmers are often unable to pass land on to their descendants.

B. SOME ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE COMMITTEE

17. We have the support of Bishop Albert on an ongoing basis.
18. A letter from him to various politicians, federal and provincial, evoked over ten responses.
19. Research has been done through certain farm and community organizations leading to liaisons and these have brought respect for our work.
20. A series of back grounders have been prepared and distributed to all faith communities for discussion, but we are not certain to what extent they have been promoted to a church people whose views on social justice action often take last place within a sacramental church.
21. Through the newsletter of the office for Social Outreach, publicity has been given to rural membership of the diocese.
22. Whenever possible, petitions and other support forms have been promoted with both urban and rural faith committees.
23. One issue of the diocesan newsletter gave prominence to members of the rural community in its struggle to be successful.
24. At least two topics related to rural issues have been part of Foundations courses.
25. The director of social outreach visited five of the seven deaneries in the diocese to report on the work of the committee.
26. Presently, all parishes have been invited to support a petition on the farmer's right to save seeds, and a sample letter based on the contents of the Bishop's letter, has been sent for people to adapt and send to the politicians of their choice.
27. The office, the social justice commission and other groups have been active in the present government study concerning WATER.
28. The office has begun to explore connections with the Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment at St. Peter's College in Muenster.
29. Related issues of pesticides, genetically modified and terminator seeds, proposals such as ACRE are being explored.

C. QUANDARIES

30. How can (should) the committee move from discussion to action on food security and rural viability?
31. What solutions are there to subsidies given by competing countries(e.g. U.S. and European Union)?
32. How can (should) we promote additions to farm income such as increased prairie food processing?
33. What can be done to move the mood of many away from the stress and resulting violence under which farm families, and others, live?
34. What financial alternatives are there to alleviate the tax burden being placed on farm ownership and individuals while corporations continue to enjoy ever decreasing taxation?

35. Will global corporations ever begin to act for the common good rather than their own ever increasing profits and market power? Is there any effective way we can influence a corporation's outlook?
36. What effective political actions can farmers take to draw moral and financial support from society as a whole?
37. How can the church become an effective voice for its members while staying out of the political arena?
38. What possibilities are there for the rural and the urban people to work together?

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