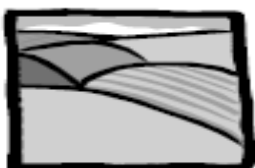


Sowing the Seeds

*A journey of acting on God's dream for
rural America
Six session adult study*





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Facilitator's Guide

Background

In March of 2003, a small group of rural Nebraska United Methodists, under the auspices of Peace with Justice Ministries-UMC, formed the *Sowing the Seeds* covenant group. It has grown into an ecumenical witness.

Our goal is to pray, study, and act for God's shalom in rural America. Out of many conversations, we decided that the design of a Christian-based adult study could be helpful in fostering healthy discussions about God's dream for rural peoples, their communities and the land.

Six sessions and class size: This adult curriculum is designed for six-60 minute class sessions but your group may wish to adapt it for a longer study. To enhance discussion, we suggest a maximum class size of twelve. If you have more people, you may wish to form small groups for discussion.

Leadership: We recommend that a pastor and lay person co-facilitate this study.



Session One

The Story of Bountiful Prairie

Materials needed: Bible, masking tape, newsprint with discussion guides, newsprint with session goals, newsprint and markers for group responses, copies of Session One hand-out of *The Story of Bountiful Prairie*, copies of Session Two hand-out of the Bruggemann article, and a small bell. Optional: music playing as folks come in, pictures on the walls which illustrate the vision in Isaiah 65:21-22.

Guides for constructive discussion: Anytime there are complex realities to face, there will be a multitude of varying viewpoints of what should be done. There will be many opportunities, during this six session course, for folks to speak their minds and also to listen respectfully to other perspectives and ideals. Indeed, the Holy Spirit may be most active when there is struggle and disagreement. God works in our most uncomfortable moments to help us stretch and grow. A few guidelines will help us foster a healthy environment for discussion.

Optional model for sharing: Every person has four to six chips. When he or she wishes to speak they toss one chip in a basket. This approach helps give equal time to those who speak easily and often and those who may wish to speak, but find it hard to “jump in.” After the chips have been used, the person will simply listen for the rest of the class period. Another model to enhance sharing is to use an egg timer.

The following are suggested guidelines. Post these on newsprint so all can see and keep them up for all sessions.

How to Talk About Difficult Issues

Adapted by the NE Synod, ELCA from an Alban Institute publication

- ✘ **TRY TO ESTABLISH AN ATMOSPHERE OF FAIRNESS.** For the leader: You will have your own opinions, but try to lead impartially. Communicate the process that will be followed.
- ✘ **THERE SHOULD BE NO KIND OF THREAT HANGING OVER THE DISCUSSION.** Take no votes, offer no ultimatums.

- ✘ **TRY TO IDENTIFY AREAS OF AGREEMENT.** People will be on a continuum on controversial issues; there may be more than two sides to an issue.
- ✘ **AVOID THE USE OF SLOGANS.**
- ✘ **REPRESENT OPPOSING POSITIONS ACCURATELY & FAIRLY.** Practice active listening skills of summarizing and paraphrasing what people are saying.
- ✘ **TRY TO IDENTIFY THE CORE OR CENTRAL ISSUES AT STAKE.** Which issues are most important? Are some largely beside the point?
- ✘ **ADMIT WEAKNESS IN ONE'S OWN POSITION.** If the issues were crystal clear and self-evident, there would not be a controversy.
- ✘ **DISTINGUISH MORALITY FROM PUBLIC POLICY.**
- ✘ **INCLUDE PERSPECTIVES OF ALL CONCERNED.**
- ✘ **LET A GOOD DISCUSSION BE AN END IN ITSELF.** There is no need for consensus or conclusion.

Goals for the sessions: (post on newsprint and read aloud)

- 1) Create space to hear the voice of God and be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Encourage discussion about trends in rural America communities.
- 3) Explore biblical understandings of land management.
- 4) Discuss how public policy shapes our future.
- 5) Discuss the pros and cons of policy proposals for a better future.
- 6) Things YOU can DO to help create a better rural future.

Space for God's Voice

Where there is no vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18) Part of these sessions will have to do with listening, imaging, and responding to God's vision for us. We are going to do a lot of talking, but we're also going to have spaces of silence where we can each listen to the voice of God.

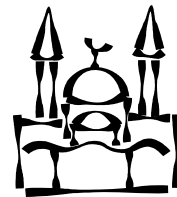
We are a very verbal society so this may seem strange at first, but we hope that you will learn to enjoy the silence and open yourself to God in those moments. A bell will be used to bring you into a period of silence and the facilitator will invite you to be mindful of your breathing as a prayer practice. At the end of the period of silence the bell will sound again and class discussion will resume.

You are invited to relax, take a few deep slow breaths and listen to the words of Isaiah 65:21-22. Each phrase can be an *in breath* or an *out breath*. As I read the first line “They shall build houses and inhabit them” you breathe in and as I read the next line “they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” you breathe out.

So with each line you are aware of the breath of God in you. This is a time for slowing down, for opening yourself to the vision of God. (Sound a bell. Facilitator reads this slowly three times and allows silence at the end, then gently sounds the bell. Option: Refer to pictures around the room of images that reflect this vision of Isaiah.)

(breathing in)	They shall build houses and inhabit them:
(breathing out)	They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit;
(breathing in)	They shall not build and another inhabit;
(breathing out)	They shall not plant and another eat;
(breathing in)	For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
(breathing out)	And my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hand.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus...



JESUS CLEARS THE TEMPLE

A guided meditation

Mark 11:15-19, Matthew 15:12-17, Luke 19:45-48, John 2: 13-17

Ask the participants to sit straight in their chairs, with feet flat on the floor, placing hands in their laps or on their knees. Invite them to close their eyes and to begin relaxing through their breathing. Let them know that through a guided meditation, they will travel to a place where time and distance are not barriers. Ask them to “go” with an open heart.

Please close your eyes now that you are comfortably seated. Begin by taking in a deep breath. Then slowly let it out. Take another deep breath, and slowly let it out. Notice how you are beginning to relax. Be conscious of your breathing. As you quiet yourself, continue to relax by being aware of the rhythm of your breathing. You realize that you are slowly approaching a new place. As you get closer, you realize that this is the time and place of Jesus. You are aware that you are now in the Jerusalem of Jesus. In the distance you see the great Temple. Even at this distance you are impressed with its beauty. Now as you stand before the gates of the Temple

you are in awe of its majesty. You drink in its beauty and awe and wonder. As the grandeur of the Temple settles in, you become aware of sounds that seem out of place. Your eyes gradually shift toward the sound. You see the money changers at their tables. But what really gets your attention is the commotion around them. It looks like the market place instead of the Temple with all of the buying and selling of sheep, oxen, doves, and pigeons. As you listen more closely, you hear complaints and arguments. You see injustices unfold: exorbitant commissions as money is exchanged. Inflated prices for the animals sold. Weights are rigged for cereal offerings. Widows are cheated. You feel your insides stirring. Your emotions are aroused. Can you name them?

Suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see something swirling in the air. A rope? No, a whip! A flock of doves swoops by your face. Sheep run by you. You have to run for cover as oxen stampede. Hundreds of coins roll by your feet as you watch the man upset the money changers' tables. Above the commotion you hear a voice speaking with authority saying, "Get them out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" (John 2:16 NAB)

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples, but you have turned it into a den of thieves." (Mark 11:17 NAB) You realize that it is Jesus who has done this.

As the whirlwind of fury dies down, you notice that Jesus is on the other side of the Temple area. You see him touching people. You realize that Jesus is healing them, restoring their sight and curing them. (see Luke 21:14) A calmness overtakes you. You realize that Jesus is not just a great miracle worker but also a great advocate of justice. You are aware that the courage of Jesus is your courage as well.

With this new-found comfort, you find yourself slowly drifting away from that time and place of Jesus. A prayer for continued courage in the face of conflict and controversy is said. A prayer of thanksgiving is offered for the opportunity to be a disciple of Jesus.

Distribute the hand-out of *The Story of Bountiful Prairie*

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to engage participants in discussion about trends in the rural economy and their community. It will lay the groundwork for subsequent sessions on biblical statements on these issues, the root forces driving current trends and practical options for creating a better future for rural communities and family farming and ranching in the 21st century. While this story is historical in content, many identify with it as the beginning of the downfall of agriculture in rural America.

Directions: Read aloud the purpose statement above. Then read the story and discuss the following questions as a group: 1) How is it similar to your community?

2) How is it different from what is happening in your community? and 3) What are the key forces driving trends in your community?

Between each of the three questions, pause and sound the bell for a moment of silence, sound the bell again to proceed to next question. Designate a recorder to write brief responses of the group on newsprint.

Distribute Session Two handout and ask class members to read it before the next session.

Close with responsive reading from a paraphrase of Genesis 1. Group responds with **God saw it was good.**

Leader: God spoke “Light” and light appeared. And God separated the light from the dark. God named the light day and the dark night. And it was day one.

Group response: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke “Sky in the middle of the waters; separate water from water.” God separated the water under the sky from the water above the sky. God named sky the heavens. And it was day two.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke, “Land, appear.” God named the land earth, the pooled water ocean. God spoke “Earth grow all varieties of seed-bearing plants, and every fruit-bearing tree. “ And it was evening and morning. And it was day three.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke “Lights! Come out... Shine in the heaven’s sky. Separate the day and night. Mark the seasons and days and years.” God made two big lights; God placed them in the heavenly sky to light up the earth. And it was day four.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke, “Swarm, Ocean, with fish and all sea life! Birds, fly through the sky over the earth. Prosper, reproduce, fill the ocean, and reproduce on earth.” And it was the fifth day.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke and Earth generated life of every sort and kind; cattle, reptiles and wild animals. Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image.” God created them male and female. God blessed them. “Prosper and reproduce.” Then God said, “I’ve given you every sort of seed-bearing plant for food.” God looked over everything God had made. And it was the sixth day.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: On the seventh day God rested from all God's work. God blessed the seventh day and made it a Holy Day. Because on that day God rested from God's work and this is the story of how it all started.

Group: And God saw it was all good.



Session Two

Exploring biblical understandings of land management

Materials needed: Bible, bell, hymnal, newsprint with reflections from your denomination's statements regarding rural life, extra copies of Session Two Hand-out. Optional: music as folks gather.

Welcome: Space for God's voice: Repeat the meditation from Isaiah 65:21-22 from the first session. Begin with the gentle sound of a bell and end with the sound of a bell. Do not rush this meditation, go slowly.

Discuss the questions about the article.

Sound the bell for a few moments of silence. Sound the bell again to resume conversation.

Refer to your denomination's statements which focus on rural life.

Ask folks to bring this handout to the following class sessions.

Closing: Responsive reading of the first stanza of *For the Fruits of This Creation* (used with permission from Augsburg Fortress) Ask group to respond with **Thanks be to God.**

Leader: *For the fruits of this creation...*

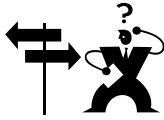
Group: ***Thanks be to God.***

Leader: *For good gifts to every nation...*

Group: ***Thanks be to God.***

Leader: *For the plowing, sowing reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping, Future needs in earth's safe-keeping...*

Group: ***Thanks be to God.***



Session Three:
Explore how public policy shapes the future

Materials needed: Bibles (same translation) for everyone in the class, Session Two Hand-out, Session Three Hand-out.

Space for God's voice: Begin again with the Isaiah 65:21-22 breathing in and out meditation. Sound the bell at the beginning and end.

Distribute Session Three Hand-out and read aloud the purpose statement and directions. Designate a time keeper to keep discussion moving from one policy to the next. Between each conversation about a policy, sound the bell for a few moments of silence, sound the bell again and move on to the next policy discussion.

Close: Responsive reading of Psalm 123

A Prayer for Mercy, Psalm 123

Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.

Behold, as the eyes of servants *look* unto the hand of their masters, *and* as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress;

So our eyes *wait* upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt.

Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.



Session Four and Five: Policy Proposals for a Better Rural Future

Materials needed: Bible, bell, Session Two Hand-out, Sessions Four & Five Hand-out, select a hymn which affirms God's gift of land and bounty, newsprint with discussion questions.

Space for God's voice: Repeat the breathing in and out meditation centered on Isaiah 65:21-22 using the sound of the bell at the beginning and the end.

Distribute Sessions Four & Five Hand-out and read aloud the purpose and go over the directions. It will be helpful to have a time keeper to keep discussion flowing from one policy proposal to the next. You will have two sessions to cover all the proposals. Between each policy proposal sound the bell.

Closing: Read aloud the words of the hymn, selected by you, as your sending forth.



Session Six:

Things YOU can do to help create a better rural future

Materials needed: Bible, several sheets of newsprint, markers and masking tape, covenant forms, hymn *You are the Seed* from your denomination's hymnal, package of seeds to share, hand-outs for session six, envelopes, copies of evaluation form.

Space for God's voice: Breathing meditation of Isaiah 65:21-22. Begin with the sound of the bell and end with the sound of the bell.

Distribute the hand-out for session six and read aloud the purpose and the directions. Between each discussion question sound the bell for a moment of silence and sound the bell again to proceed.

Refer to the resources on the session six hand-out.

Read together the first stanza of *You are the Seed* but use the word I instead of you. (If this hymn is not in your hymnal, select another with words of personal commitment.)

You are the Seed

[I am] the seed that will grow a new sprout;

[I am] a star that will shine in the night;

[I am] the yeast and a small grain of salt, a beacon to glow in the dark.

[I am] the dawn that will bring a new day;

[I am] the wheat that will bear golden grain;

[I am] a sting and a soft, gentle touch, my witnesses wherever [I] go.

Go, my friends, go to the world, proclaiming love to all, messengers of my forgiving peace, eternal love.

Be, my friends, a loyal witness, from the dead I arose; "Lo, I'll be with you forever, till the end of the world."

United Methodist Hymnal, 583. Words & Music by Cesareo Gabaraín.

Distribute the covenant forms and invite class members to be in silence (sound the bell) and prayerfully consider what each can do to plant seeds of God's vision in rural America. Allow five minutes for this silent process. Then invite the entire class to discuss what actions they may take TOGETHER...put those on newsprint. Then

allow some time for individuals to write their own personal covenants. The covenant forms may be placed in self-addressed envelopes and the facilitator mail them out six weeks after the class as a reminder of commitments made.

You may wish to schedule a reunion in four to six weeks to see what folks are doing and to plan more steps of involvement.

Distribute evaluation forms and ask folks to complete and leave with facilitator. Facilitator, please send them to: ***Peace with Justice Ministries, 3735 No. 39th St, Omaha, NE 68111-2621***

Closing: Responsive reading of third verse of *You are the Seed* (using I instead of you) continued as facilitator gives a seed to each class member as a symbol of our power to grow God's dream for rural America.

You are the Seed

[I am] the life that will nurture the plant;

[I am] the waves in a turbulent sea;

yesterday's yeast is beginning to rise, a new loaf of bread it will yield.

There is no place for a city to hide, nor a mountain can cover its might;

May [my] good deeds show a world in despair a path that will lead all to God.

Go my friends, go to the world, proclaiming love to all, messengers of my forgiving peace, eternal love.

Be, my friends, a loyal witness, from the dead I arose; "Lo, I'll be with you forever, till the end of the world".

United Methodist Hymnal, 583. Words & Music by Cesareo Gabaraín.

Sessions One – Six Handouts



Session One Hand-out

The Story of Bountiful Prairie

In 1974, the community of Bountiful Prairie was booming. The Russians were buying grain and crop prices were rising. Strong grain prices prompted strong livestock prices.

Young families who had started their lives in the city were coming back home to farm. Main Street was booming. Farmers were buying new cars, pickups and tractors. Merchants were bringing their sons and daughters into their businesses and building new homes. Churches and schools were sprouting new additions.

But when commodity prices softened and interest rates skyrocketed in the 80s, it all came crashing down with record foreclosures and families leaving the land. Machinery dealers and small businesses went down in a chain reaction.

Things were a little better by the end of the 80s and in the subsequent decades. Still, the community seemed to be slowly dying. Every year it took more acres to make the same living. Livestock production got harder as corporate farms expanded and meat packers paid them premiums, while discounting livestock from small operations.

Everyone was adapting as best they could. Many farmers tightened their belts and hunkered down to pay off debts and make it to retirement. Those who could find them took off farm jobs. Some decided to call it quits while they could still hold on to the family land. Most told their kids to not even think about coming back to farm.

A few families decided the answer was to get big. Why not? Under the farm program, the bigger you farmed the more money you got. New technology like Roundup Ready made it feasible to manage bigger acres. Competition among expanding farms was fierce. Cash rents and land prices went up, squeezing profit margins ever tighter.

The whole community was struggling. Efforts to lure a new factory to town were not successful. To the contrary, the one plant that had moved to Bountiful Prairie in the 60s for its lower labor costs now moved to China to hire people for a few dollars a day.

Retail businesses were suffering from declining population and growing competition from a Wal-Mart down the road. Local merchants complained that wholesalers charged them more than the retail price at Wal-Mart, which used its size to get deep volume discounts. Still, local people flocked to Wal-Mart. It was cheap. Some took part time jobs there. But pay was low and there were no benefits.

Every institution in town was struggling. Church attendance and donations were down. There were fewer young families in town to participate. The school was considering closing. Kindergarten enrollment kept dropping and state aid was declining.



Session Two Hand-out

Synopsis of Walter Bruggemann's article, "Land: Fertility and Justice"

by David Hansen

In the book Theology of the Land, published by Liturgical Press of Collegeville, Minnesota, 1987, Walter Bruggemann is the contributor for chapter two, entitled, "Land: Fertility and Justice" (pp. 41-68). Bruggemann presents the biblical understanding that the land is a gift of God to the human community and is a part of the whole covenantal relationship between God and humanity (Genesis 1&2). God is a creator who desires to see fertility and productivity in the land and in order for such to happen there must be justice and righteousness in the social relations among the people and the land must be managed with care and tending as a partner.

There are two temptations that are to be avoided if humankind is to uphold the covenant. Promiscuity and domination. The temptation to promiscuity is to be in a relationship only so long as it is convenient then move on to another. This promiscuity can be in relation to one's spouse or to the land. Human behavior is of one piece. When the mate or parcel of land no longer suits one's desires it is discarded for another.

The other temptation, domination, is to hold and control the partner, be it spouse or land, so tightly so as to squeeze the life out of such. There are no regards for the right of the spouse or the land. In both cases it reduces the spouse and the land to commodities. They are there for the sole benefit of the possessor and the owner is free to use, abuse, and discard at one's convenience.

The root cause of violation of the covenant by humanity is idolatry, the assigning of a higher loyalty to something or some other than God. Two scriptures that make this point are Ezekiel 18:6-8 and 16:46-50. These two passages not only show the moral misconduct that springs from idolatry, but also the connection between sexuality and economics. In the latter passage the prophet recasts the Sodom story of sexual aberrations in Genesis 18-19 into an indictment on economic distortions.

Bruggemann explores three biblical themes that are contrary to Israel's theory of land as inheritance and relate to productivity and justice. The first of these is the right of enclosure. This is a practice whereby the strong and the powerful are able either by legal means or otherwise, to get land from the weak and poor.

“Enclosure is a formidable act that imagines the land and one’s possession of it is unattached to and unconcerned for social relation” (p. 50). A case in point is found in I Kings 21. King Ahab desires Naboth’s vineyard. When Naboth responds that he cannot sell it because it is an inheritance, the King and his wife Jezebel proceed to use their power and influence to acquire it. In which case the land was reduced to a tradable commodity and meant that “nobody’s land was safe and secure, but that land became an arena for commercialism and all the social problems that emerge when the strong are aligned against the weak” (p.46). Deuteronomy 19:14 lifts up Israel’s theory of land as inheritance and is designed to resist monopoly. The prophets in Amos 5:7, 6:12 and Isaiah 5:7 speak out against those who pervert justice through legal channels in taking land from orphans and socially marginalized people.

In our time the theory of autonomous markets has become a means of enclosure. “Until the 18th century, the market was not held to be autonomous in its operation, but was an aspect of social policy) (pp. 49050). In effect the autonomous market as a means of enclosure is “a practice of triage, that is, the intentional elimination of those who are judged to be superfluous, marginal and not of sufficient value to sustain...It behooves us to recognize that all free market theory that seeks to separate economic transactions from social relations is destructive” (p.50).

The second theme is you shall not covet. “That commandment has largely been trivialized into a psychological matter concerning jealousy and envy—but is to be understood in terms of public policy and social practice” (p. 51). “Do not covet your neighbor’s house, your neighbor’s wife, your neighbor’s field...” (Ex 20:17, Deut 5.21). Thus the commandment also concerns land policy. Again I Kings 21 deals with “the rapacious policies of the monarchy which legitimized confiscation of a most greedy kind” (p.52). The prophets in Micah 2:1-5 and Isaiah 5:8-10 state the consequences of land seizure. “Undisciplined and unneighborly land practice finally leads to a reckoning” (p. 53). The land will become unproductive and things will be reversed when God sides with the poor and displaced. “Just social relations are foundational and prerequisite for productive land” (p.55).

The third theme is defilement of the land. This theme is more difficult for us to handle because in our secular society ritual defilement is a notion quite alien to us. “Now we are in the sphere of shame and contamination, that is much more elemental than guilt and morality. Such defilement renders the object impure, unavailable for religious use. The Holy God of Israel will not and cannot stay in a place that is defiled” (p.55-56).

The text for this theme is Deut. 24:1-4. “This law concerns marital relations. It is about a situation in which a man divorces a wife. She goes to a second husband. But the second marriage also ends. Then she wants to return to the first husband and resume that relationship. The point of the legal prohibition is that the first husband, even if he wants to, may not take the woman back again...The reason that such a return is prohibited is that she was intended for the singular ‘use’ of the first husband. But having been put to other use, i.e. the second husband, she is no longer suitable for the first, proper relationship. Now this may strike us as primitive and severely sexist, for matters are clearly not symmetrical for the man and the

woman. But on its own terms, one may consider this defilement. The prohibition refers to improper use that renders proper use impossible” (p.56).

Verse 4b is a theological commentary on this prohibition and makes an important move in interpretation: “...for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.” “The commentary labels the second relationship an abomination, which means a distortion that endangers the entire community. We may say such marital maneuvering may threaten social solidarity and order, but the usage attributes an almost material notion of abomination, as though a substance of destruction is thereby introduced into the community” (p.56). The further theological comment that especially interests us is that such an act will bring guilt on the land of inheritance. “The distorted marital relation causes distortion of the land” (p.56). It is significant how Jeremiah used this text from Deuteronomy. Jeremiah lived at a moment when Judah was to be exiled and lose its land and he presents an argument about how land is lost. He builds a metaphor in 3:1ff on the law in Deut. 24:1-4. “Yahweh is the first husband who has been violated by the wife, Judah. Judah the wife has been rejected in infidelity, and she goes to a second husband, presumably Assyrian alliance and Canaanite religion. But those connections do not work, so Judah wishes to return to Yahweh, to reestablish the covenant relation with God. The torah precludes that resumption of relation, however” (p. 57).

The prophet makes two important points. God yearns for the restoration and is even willing to violate the prohibition of the torah. Against the torah God urges Israel to repent and come home (Jer. 3:12, 14; 4:1-2). The second point is that Jeremiah also uses the language of defilement as in the old teaching of Deuteronomy.

The language of defilement is an important one for speaking about land abuse. We have cases where chemicals have contaminated the land, threatened the water table and endangered the productivity of the soil. Regarding nuclear fallout we refer to it as pollution and contamination, and we speak of dirty bombs that so defile the earth as to make life impossible except in its lowest form. “Taken together, the technology of contamination may create a moral situation in which the possibility of life is jeopardized. That, in fact, is what the priestly tradition of the Old Testament is about” (p. 58).

These three themes together — moving boundaries, which translates into the practice of enclosure, coveting, which we understand as rapacious land policy, and defilement, which we understand as pollution of the ecosystem of life — are ways in which the bible speaks about land management. These three themes respectively concern geographic, economic, and ritual dimensions of life. All of them together articulate policies that end in death” (pp58-59).

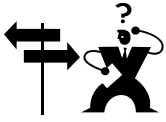
“Finally, the Bible affirms that land can be managed in ways that give life. It does not need to be handled toward death...Against moving boundaries and enclosure systems, the Bible celebrates the old land theory of inalienable patrimony as cited in Jer. 32:1-15” (p.59). There is the conviction that the old inheritance rights will finally prevail and the economy will be reestablished. Against coveting, Israel celebrates land redistribution, which breaks up monopolies and gives back land to those who

should properly have it. In Joshua 13-19, care is taken that tribal groups receive their proper entitlements” (p.60). While this land division was obliterated by the monarchy, Ezekiel 47 and 48 anticipate the reapportionment of land as remembered in Joshua 13-19. Another principle of land redistribution is the year of Jubilee as set forth in Leviticus 25 in which land is returned to its rightful owner. “Against defilement and abomination, the Bible anticipates a time when the land is free of such contamination so that production can be full and the blessings of life abundantly available” (p.61). After the fickleness and harlotry that had led to defilement of the land as expressed in Hosea 5:3 and 6:10, there is the promise of new creation in Hosea 2: 21-23. “In that day, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel and I will sow him for myself in the land.” In Isaiah there is a similar pattern. Isaiah 6:5 asserts that judgment comes against massive defilement, but then after the judgment and exile and loss of land there is to be restoration as proclaimed in Isaiah 62:4-5. “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My delight is in her, and your land married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.”

These are the ways of life and death. We must ponder that the ways of enclosure, covenant and contamination have become acceptable policy among us. Now we are at a crisis point...The human covenantal issues do not admit of technical solution. Land management must be restored to its place in the fabric of social relations. Productivity requires attention to justice. Fertility causes us to rethink economics. Sexuality raises questions of righteousness. Without righteousness and justice in land management, there may come a destroyer who will ‘make your land a waste’ (Jer.4:7). “It need not be so, but it can happen, and is indeed happening before our very eyes. “ (pp.63-64).

Questions for discussion

- 1) What examples can you name where we have tried to have production without justice? *Justice here means the proper treatment of people and the proper treatment of the environment.***
- 2) What are the implications of the biblical concepts as outlined in the article by Bruggemann for what is happening in your community?**
- 3) Bruggemann argues that autonomous markets become a method of economic triage that deprives the weak and poor of land and opportunities, can you give examples?**
- 4) While it is unrealistic to think that we could somehow go back to a time in our nation where land could be redistributed by some ancestral formula, what public policies could counter the direction in which we are now moving toward greater and greater concentration of land and wealth into fewer and fewer hands?**



Session Three Hand-out

How Public Policy Shapes our Future

Purpose: The purpose of this session is to explore how public policy shapes the future. The trends we see in rural America today are not the result of irresistible forces of nature or laws of economics. They are the result of decisions made by people — especially policy choices — that can be changed by people. Policy choices reflect values. If the trends created by current policies do not reflect our values, we can change them. The following policies are only examples. This is not an exhaustive list of policies affecting rural America. This session will lay the groundwork for subsequent sessions focused on policy solutions to create a better future for rural America.

Directions: Read aloud the purpose statement above. Then read aloud Policy A, including the Pro and Con Statements. Take ten minutes to discuss the following questions:

- 1) What are the implications of scripture studied in Session 2 for this policy?**
- 2) How is the policy shaping the future of your community?**
- 3) Is this policy helpful or is it undermining rural community and family farm and ranch vitality?**

Repeat those steps for Policy B and Policy C.

Policy A. Farm Programs and Payment Limitations —

The federal farm program provides payments based on historical production and payments to compensate farmers when prices fall below a certain level. Theoretically, payments to large farms are capped by payment limitations, but very few farms are affected, both because the limits are set at a high level (\$340,000) and because loopholes allow even those limits to be avoided.

Pro: Advocates of this policy say that farms need to be big to be efficient. And free enterprise depends on growth and expansion. If we are going to compete internationally, we need big farms that can beat the production costs of international competitors. Farms should not be penalized by payment limitations for growing in productivity and efficiency. The current policy is fair because large farms get no more payment per bushel than smaller operations. The savings from a payment limitation could be directed to rural development. Proposals for such rural development are outlined in the next two sessions.

Con: Critics say this policy subsidizes large farms to bid land away from small and mid size operations — ultimately driving them out of business. Large expanding farms get more federal payment for every acre they add. As long as that is the case, farm program benefits will be bid into higher rents and land prices and does little to improve the income of farm operators. In short, the absence of effective payment limitations drives down the profit margins in farming by subsidizing large farms to drive up land costs. And studies show big farms are no more efficient than 600 -acre farms in the Corn Belt.

Policy B. Asset and Wealth Building Strategies – A proposal for the Farm Bill would provide incentives to live and establish businesses in counties that have lost at least ten percent of their population over the last 20 years. It would provide: forgiveness of college loans for recent graduates; tax credits for home purchases, new buildings, microenterprise business development/expansion.

Pro: Strategies that build both assets and wealth benefit both individuals and their communities. Individuals and families have the opportunity to decrease the effects of poverty and communities become stronger as opportunities are afforded across a larger base. In order to create a future for struggling, rural communities and their residents, a commitment must be made to enhance opportunity through the building of assets and wealth. Home and businesses ownership binds people to a place, thereby, building stronger rural communities

Con: The program does not afford these opportunities to all struggling communities. A program such as this would be very costly and difficult to administer. Given today's society and individual preferences this likely wouldn't be effective in repopulating or reinvigorating these communities. Focus for this program is too heavy on “bricks and mortar”, buildings, not opportunities.

Policy C. State Economic Development Policy – State economic development policy has focused on providing tax incentives for large employers to create or relocate jobs. Relatively little — in some states almost nothing — focused on starting small businesses.

Pro: All other states provide incentives to lure large employers. To deny such incentives would be akin to unilateral disarmament. Large employers provide the biggest impact on the local economy. They add to the economic base for a broad range of other local businesses. If the economic base grows, a broad range of small businesses will also grow. Small —typically retail businesses — don't add to the base. They just recirculate dollars.

Con: The current policy is profoundly imbalanced. Most states invest far more per job in large corporate enterprise than small business. Rural areas are largely left out of the benefit because large employers rarely move to small rural communities. Society is weakened because the policy leads to concentration of ownership in fewer hands and shrinks the number of self-employed people able to build assets, earn a middle class income and gain a stake in the future of their community. Control of the local economy is vested in companies with no commitment to the local community.



Sessions Four & Five

Hand-out Policy Proposals for a Better Rural Future

Purpose: The purpose of this session is to engage participants in thinking about potential policy changes to create a better future for rural communities and agriculture. If we do not like the direction current policies are taking rural America, we can change them. This is not an all inclusive list of needed policy changes. Nor are they necessarily the best proposals. But they are a place to start the discussion.

Directions: Read aloud the purpose statement above. Then read aloud the proposed policy reforms below. Discuss as a group whether you would like to add any reform proposals. Then go through the proposals one by one (including those below and any added by the group) discussing the following questions: 1) What are the implications for the proposal of biblical concepts as outlined by theologian Bruggemann in session two; 2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed reform?; 3) Would you support, oppose or modify the proposal? Be sure to divide up your time to allow adequate discussion of each proposal.

A. Farm Program Payment Limitation Reform: Provide full farm program support on each farmer's first \$250,000 of production, a lesser level of support on the second \$250,000 of production and no support on production over \$500,000. Close loopholes so that each farm family (husband/wife and dependent children) is treated as one farm and cannot subdivide to avoid the limits. The savings from a payment limitation could be directed to rural development. (Proposals for such rural development follow)

B. Small Business and Entrepreneurial Development: Provide grants to organizations to provide training, technical assistance and loans to small entrepreneurs in rural areas. These grants would be available to businesses serving five or fewer employees.

C. Grants to increase the Farm and Ranch Share of Food System Profit: Make grants to farmers and ranchers, for new value-added initiatives. Grants can be used for technical assistance, legal work, market analysis, feasibility plans, etc. for new initiatives to capture high value markets and to establish new processing operations.

D. State Economic Development Policy Reforms: Establish a specific cap on annual state expenditures on job creation tax incentives. Establish standards so that incentives are provided only for quality jobs. Commit no less than 25% of the amount spent on such incentives to small business and community development programs. Establish a corporate minimum tax that requires all profitable corporations to pay some tax.

E. Conservation Security Program: Implement the program established by the last farm bill to pay farmers based on how much they do to protect the environment. Farmers who intensively manage the whole farm to address a variety of environmental issues would qualify for the highest payment. Farmers who have always practiced good stewardship would qualify, just like those who are addressing problems for the first time.

F. Individual Homestead Accounts: Provide matching funds for savings accounts established by low and moderate income people in counties that have lost more than ten percent of their population in 20 years. Funds could be withdrawn to start small businesses (including beginning farming), gain education, purchase first homes and pay medical expenses.



Session Six Hand-out

Things You Can Do to Help Create a Better Rural Future

Purpose: Engage participants in a discussion about opportunities for them to help create a better rural future ranging from very limited involvement to more significant leadership roles. Challenge participants to accept responsibility for contributing to the solution to rural problems.

Directions: Ask group to read silently the opportunities to get involved in creating a better rural future. As a group, brainstorm other ways of getting involved. Then discuss the following questions: 1) What are our responsibilities as Christians and citizens of a democracy for the betterment of our community and agriculture?; 2) What activities would fit your interests and abilities?; 3) What steps will you take? (You will be invited to fill out a covenant form at the end of this session.)

A. Extend this study to others in your community. The Center for Rural Affairs is available to help guide you through the study 402/687-2100 or info@cfra.org

B. Learn more and write or call your federal and state representatives – Sign on to the mailing list of *The Center for Rural Affairs* and join the *Rural Action Network*. You will receive the Center's monthly newsletter on rural issues and action alerts to let you know when your call or letter to your representative could make a difference. The Center for Rural Affairs, PO Box 136, Lyons, NE 68038, 402/687-2100, www.cfra.org, info@cfra.org

C. Invite a speaker to a church or community group. Ask them to speak about opportunities for your community or parish to participate in existing programs to support rural development or to address rural issues. Possibilities include:

- ✠ A speaker from The Center for Rural Affairs on its efforts to strengthen family farms, beginning farmers and ranchers, conservation programs, rural community development or how the Center can help your community foster small business development.
- ✠ A speaker from Community Organizing in Nebraska (COIN) on how your church could join its effort. Contact Tom Holler, 7262 Mercy Rd. Suite 102, Omaha, NE 68124, 402/968-7665,
- ✠ A speaker from within your community or within your denomination involved in these issues.

- ✠ A speaker from the Nebraska Community Foundation in Lincoln, NE on how communities can foster charitable giving to benefit community development through estate plans. 231 Mabel Lee Hall, UNL, Lincoln, NE 68588-0234, 402/472-5400.

D. Form a rural action group in your community or parish – In that group, develop strategies to influence your state and federal representatives. For example, your group could request a meeting with your representative or their staff. It could organize a local letter writing campaign to your state or federal representatives or sponsor a public meeting on rural issues to involve more people in your area. The Center for Rural Affairs can provide materials and assistance.

E. Work within existing organizations – Sponsor resolutions at county meetings and state conventions of existing farm, commodity and business organizations to make their policies more supportive of family farms, small business and rural communities.

F. Support small farmers globally by purchasing Fair Trade products such as coffee, tea, and chocolate for your church and personal use. One source for these products is *Equal Exchange* at www.equalexchange.com., 50 United Drive, West Bridgewater, MA 02379, 774/776-7400

Resources for further meditation, study and involvement

Psalms from the Heartland, Judy F. Hoff, 8110 60th Avenue Southwest, Carson, ND 58529-9643 ISBN: 0967406706

The Politics of Jesus, John Howard Yoker, 1980, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI ISBN: 0802807348

Theology of the Land, Leonard Weber, Walter Bruggeman, C. Dean Freudenberger, John Hart, Richard Cartwright Austin, Bernard Evans and Gregory Cusack, 1987, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN (Also available through National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Des Moines, IA).

Heartland Network for Town & Rural Ministries, Judith Bortner Heffernan, PO Box 1405, Columbia, MO 65205, 573/442-5465

Congressional Contacts:

Email addresses for United States Senators can be found at:
http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

Email for United States House of Representatives members can be found at:
<http://www.house.gov/writerep/>

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Sowing the Seeds:

A Journey of acting on God's dream for rural America

Date: _____

I, _____ covenant with God and the people of America to do the following to make God's dream come to be:

I will pray that God's vision for rural America will come to be.

My prayer practice will involve: _____

I will study and take action in the following ways:

I will do all this between now and _____

According to God's Word in Isaiah 65:21-23, *They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will the days of my people be; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord.*"



Sowing the Seeds:

A Journey of acting on God's dream for rural America

Group Covenant

Date: _____

We covenant with God and the people of America to do the following to make God's dream come to be:

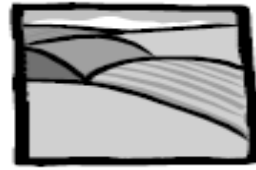
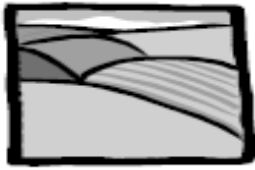
We will pray that God's vision for rural America will come to be.

My prayer practice will involve: _____

We will study and take action in the following ways: _____

We will do all this between now and _____

Signatures:



Rating range: 1 is excellent and 10 is poor; circle the number that reflects your evaluation.

Facilitators: The instructions for facilitation were 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments and questions for further exploration: _____

Group: How did the curriculum meet the intended goals? _____

Create space to hear the voice of God and be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Encourage discussion about trends in rural America communities

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Explore biblical understandings of land management

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Discuss how public policy shapes our future

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Discuss the pros and cons of policy proposals for a better future

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Inspire participants to commit to actions that will create a better rural future

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

*Please mail to: Peace with Justice Ministries,
3735 No. 39th St, Omaha, NE 68111-2621
Your evaluation will help us improve the curriculum in the future.*

Facilitator's Resources

Farm Programs

Payment Limitation Reform as proposed by Senator Charles Grassley

The single most effective thing Congress could do to strengthen family farms is to stop subsidizing mega farms to drive them out of business by bidding land away from them. This legislation would do just that.

Lower Limits - The Grassley Bill would establish effective caps of \$35,000 on direct (fixed) payments, \$65,000 on counter cyclical payments and \$175,000 on loan deficiency payments and marketing loan gains, including gains on generic certificates and forfeited commodities. The nominal limits would be half these amounts.

Simplification – Qualifying for the maximum legal payment would be greatly simplified. Farmers would not need to reorganize under the three entity rule. An individual who participates in just one farming operation could receive double the nominal limit, just like an individual who reorganizes his/her farm under the three entity rule. That would reduce farmers’ legal costs by allowing them to receive the maximum payment without hiring a lawyer to restructure the farm.

Spouse Equity Rule – The spouse equity rule would be retained in its entirety. Married couples who qualify under the spouse rule would receive up to twice the nominal payment limitations, as under current law. They would continue to be eligible for the same maximum payment as producers who reorganize under the three-entity rule, just like current law.

Loophole Closings –The Secretary of Agriculture would be directed to promulgate regulations to prevent schemes to get around these limits, in part by counting all payments on production under the primary control of a single person toward that person’s limitations, under certain circumstances. This would prevent mega farms from avoiding the limitations by constructing business relationships that allow them to control production but put crop ownership and payments in the name of other parties.

These regulations would come into play only when payments on the production controlled by a person exceed the effective limits established by this Act. They would apply to large farmers who 1) share rent land for more than the usual and customary rate in return for other concessions to shift payments to the land owner, 2) provide custom farming services to family members or entities that have less than an arms length relationship; or 3) have primary control over a joint operation or multiple entities.

Rationale for the Act - Farmers are not well served by current law. It imposes no real limit on marketing loans gains and its loopholes ensure that limits on direct and counter cyclical payments affect almost no one who spends money on a good lawyer. Thus, it subsidizes the nation’s largest farms to drive their neighbors out of business by bidding land away from them.

Large, aggressive operations use their payments to bid up land prices to get more acres. In the process, virtually all of the program benefits are bid into higher land prices – increasing cash rents, land payments and property taxes. As a result, farm program payments are offset by increased production costs and, in the end, do nothing to improve the income of farmers except on previously owned land.

In short, the farm program encourages farmers to do things that drive down agricultural profitability. In the book *Competitive Advantage*, Harvard Business professor Michael Porter observes that when multiple firms engage in aggressive competition to become the high-volume,

low-margin producer in an industry, the result for profitability can be “disastrous”. That is happening in counties across the American farm belt, fueled by uncapped federal payments.

With foreign competition and uncompetitive markets driving down commodity prices, the last thing we need is policy that unnecessarily inflates land costs. Not only does it lower farm profitability. It lays the groundwork for a land price collapse, should the federal spigot tighten.

This proposal would have a moderating impact on land prices. It keeps the basic program in place to stabilize land prices, but it removes the fuel of uncapped federal payments from land price inflation, thus improving the profitability and competitiveness of our farms.

This legislation would leave farmers free to farm as much land as they want. Those who choose to farm big would still receive bigger payments than most farmers, but they would not be offered unlimited federal assistance to expand at the expense of their neighbors.

Neither farmers nor rural America are well served when federal dollars fuel the consolidation of farming into fewer hands. It is destroying mid-size farms and depriving us of an entire generation of young farmers, undermining the rural communities in which all farmers have a stake. That’s bad for all of us.

Finally, cutting payments to mega farms is far preferable way to meeting federal budget constraints that cutting programs that offer a future to rural America. Recent budget cuts have taken significant funds from conservation programs and eliminated most of the new money invested in rural development by the 2002 farm bill. For example, the Value Added Producer Grants Program that helps farmers launch new value added initiatives has been cut by 60 percent.

Without effective payment limitations, there simply will not be funding available for this and other programs that offer a future to rural America.

Fixed Direct Payment Limit	Fixed Direct Payment Limit		Counter Cyclical Payment Limit	
	Husband/Wife	Parents/2 Sons or Daughters	Husband/Wife	Parents/2 Sons or Daughters
Corn/Soybeans (50/50)	2,303	6,908	3,255	9,765

For more information on how you can help make a difference, please call Chuck Hassebrook, Executive Director, at the Center for Rural Affairs 402-687-2100, ext 1018 or by email chuckh@cfra.org.

Rural Development Proposals for the 2007 Farm Bill

Rural Development Policy Options for the 2007 Farm Bill Center for Rural Affairs

July 2006

The Rural Development Title of the 2007 Farm Bill should focus on entrepreneurial development – both on the farm and in non farm pursuits - and building assets and wealth for rural people and rural communities. Over half of all new jobs in the most rural regions of the nation come from small non-farm proprietorships termed microenterprise. Options include:

Creation of the Rural Entrepreneurs and Microenterprise Program to provide grants to organizations to provide training, technical assistance and loans to small entrepreneurs in rural areas. The program would serve businesses that employ 5 or fewer people and cannot get commercial credit.

Creation of a Community Entrepreneurial Development Program based on four pillars of rural economic and community development: small entrepreneurship, charitable giving to support community development, youth engagement and leadership development. This program would offer grants to collaborating communities to establish regional initiatives for entrepreneurial development, including small business education and technical assistance, leadership development, youth attraction and retention, community-based philanthropy, and intergenerational business transfer planning. We propose mandatory funding of \$75 million annually.

Creation of an Entrepreneurship Education Program administered through the four regional rural development centers. This program would make grants to four-year and community colleges, the extension services, non-profit organizations and primary and secondary schools to provide access for rural Americans to entrepreneurship education. Too often in rural America, we educate our young to move away. This program would help educate rural people to create their future in rural America. We propose mandatory funding of \$50 million annually.

Individual Homestead Accounts – Provide matching funds for savings accounts established by low and moderate income people in counties that have lost more than ten percent of their population in 20 years. Funds could be withdrawn to start small businesses (including beginning farming), gain education, purchase first homes and pay medical expenses.

The Value-Added Producer Grant program makes grants to farmers and ranchers, including groups of farmers and ranchers, for new value added initiatives. Grants can be used for technical assistance, legal work, market analysis, feasibility plans etc for new initiatives to capture high value markets and to establish new processing operations. Funding for the program should be doubled to \$50 million annually. The program should prioritize project that strengthen the profitability and viability of small- and medium-sized farms and ranches and set aside 10-15 percent of funds for projects concerning beginning farmers and ranchers.

A Family Farm Innovation Fund should be created to provide seed capital for innovative initiatives to strengthen family farming and ranching opportunities. For example, an agricultural bank in eastern Iowa is sponsoring a series of forums on machinery cooperatives as a means of enabling small and mid-size farms to lower machinery costs to competitive levels. But it takes legal work and research to launch such initiatives. USDA innovation funds could support such initiatives by providing the Secretary of Agriculture authority to use up to \$2.5 million annually to support such initiatives from funds authorized and appropriated for USDA direct lending programs.

Conservation-Based Development - Public access to natural space can be a development asset for communities. It can draw young family to start businesses, populate the schools and revitalize communities. And it can provide the basis for new tourism related self-employment opportunities involving bed and breakfasts, hunting, horseback riding, hiking, biking, wildlife viewing and other activities.

Conservation programs should work in concert with community initiatives to use public access to natural space as a development asset. Landowners who enroll in the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetland Reserve Program or the Grassland Reserve Program should receive bonus payments if they restore natural space and provide public access as part of a community plan to use natural space as a development asset.

Conservation programs should help conservation-minded beginning farmers get started. Programs that provide a ten-year stream of payments could, for beginning farmers, provide one up-front, lump-sum payment in return for a binding 10-year conservation commitment. So structured, conservation payments could help finance farm entry and help establish both stewardship and resource stewards on the land.

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