The Shaming of Canada's Farmers: A Christian Response

Cameron Harder

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol21/iss2/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
The Shaming of Canada’s Farmers: A Christian Response

Cameron R. Harder
Pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church, Camrose, Alberta

“When a farmer is in financial difficulty, everybody seems to shun him. If you’re a failure financially it’s almost like having the plague. You stay away....”
“We’re losing the farm and we’re just too ashamed to admit it.”
“We were feeling ashamed, incompetent. We’d hang our heads in shame without support, feeling the community was looking down on us.”

Shame. It seems to be characteristic of almost every farmer who loses his or her land. Situations may vary, but the response is the same. When farms are in serious financial difficulty, farmers tend to withdraw. They become protective guardians of a “disgraceful” family secret often kept even from their own children. As the weight of that secret grows, the family pulls back from public events, becoming gradually less visible in church and community. Just when it is most desperately needed, they are often unable to reach out for support. This “shaming” is reflected not only in the feelings of the farm family, but also in a real loss of social position. Frequently there is little support offered even when the problem is well known. There are a variety of reasons for this: the absence of appropriate rituals of support, a desire to respect the family’s privacy, an irrational sense that misfortune is contagious, a fear that one’s own resources will be depleted in helping without any possibility of reciprocation, discomfort in dealing with strong emotions and so on. For some farmers suicide seems the only way out.

The church has generally not been very successful in penetrating the isolation. John King, a London, Ontario farmer who was appointed by the United Church to assist in farm
distress, says he finds that farmers are simply not willing to discuss their personal financial problems with outsiders. His visits are regarded as visible indications of failure, or a sign that the neighbours have been talking about one’s situation. Don Robinson, a dedicated rural pastor, agrees. He has a high level of trust among the farmers of his area. He participated in the farm protest march on Ottawa in 1992, sat on an agriculture crisis team, regularly spends time working with farmers on their land, and has set up a number of discussions and projects on the farm crisis. Yet he finds that he simply does not have access to the deep financial problems of his parishioners. The shame is a fortress and there seem to be few doors.

Not only have churches had difficulty in getting past the shame to offer assistance, they have often helped to create it. Having interviewed 130 farmers across Canada, Diane Baltaez notes that, “Despite their professed piety, some older conservative farmers believe that the ‘farm crisis’ is a result of victims reaping what they sow. The individualistic Protestant (or Catholic) work ethic, which states that hard work and frugality guarantee success (and a good Christian life), makes failure morally impossible.” She quotes a farmer in a Bible belt county as saying “it’s uncool to admit that you have a problem...There’s such a stigma attached to failure here. Maybe religion can be cruel here.”

As the pastor of a town congregation in a rural setting, I have found that my sensitivity to the problem is greatly diminished by the fact that the farmers who are active in our church are those who are doing well. They, not the farmers in crisis, have the time to devote to church leadership and programs. Because most of my contact is with them, I am left with the impression that things are well in the farm community, or at least that any problems can be solved with good management (the sort in evidence on their farms). My failure to attend to those in trouble is taken by them as confirmation of their fall from grace.

I have no simple advice for the church in its efforts to respond to the shame of farmers who are losing or have lost their land. However, I would like to offer some analysis that may provide a glimpse into the roots of that shame and perhaps stimulate some creative possibilities for action and care.
Three Farm Metaphors

According to students of human language such as Paul Ricoeur, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, our symbolic construction of the world is fundamentally dependent on metaphor. Metaphors can even be understood to be essential to the continued existence of individual and corporate human life. They give unity and meaning. They arouse loyalty, integrate one’s perceptions of reality, establish values, and give form to one’s hopes and aspirations. Metaphors literally make it possible for us to conceive of reality in a certain way, or, by their limitations, restrict that possibility.

In the history of Canadian agriculture, particularly in the west, three metaphors have become deeply rooted in farm perspectives. They are the “frontier”, the “land of plenty”, and the “pioneer”. Undoubtedly there are others as well, but these three in particular seem to have had a lasting impact. Because of Canada’s vast area, relative youth, and small population, it has always had the image of being a “frontier” country. During the early settlement of the prairies, popular fiction portrayed the west as a land of unequalled adventure and opportunity: “Here was the freedom of a life close to nature. Here a man’s strength and virtue determined his fate.”

Robert Ballantyne, one of the widest read authors of the late nineteenth century, described western Canada as an almost untrodden wilderness where individuals could leave their failures behind and start over again. This was a place one could pursue excellence unhindered by “sloth” or “urban bureaucracy”.

Self-reliance, rugged individualism, and freedom are prominent values of this metaphor. They are still deeply compelling for farmers today. Connie Dublenko, a 50-year-old third-generation Canadian farmer of Russian Orthodox stock says, “Farming has its advantages. I make my own decisions according to what I think is best for myself. That gives me many opportunities to do what I want to do with the farm as I see fit. That’s what I mean by being your own boss....You can’t put a price tag on the freedom you have on the farm.”

The second metaphor, “the land of plenty” (or the “agrarian utopia”), is in part the creation of the government’s immigration program in the early 1900s. The propagandists who advertised the west’s virtues to would-be settlers described it
as “the largest flower garden on the continent”. It was touted as a fertile utopia whose lands had lain fallow from Creation. Posters displayed wheat too tall to see over, fruit a foot in diameter, and farms that had gone from ground breaking to plantation wealth in less than a decade. The classic example is a poster which shows an angel flying over fertile farms showering a cornucopia of gold on the land with the title “Prosperity Follows Settlement in Western Canada”.\(^\text{10}\)

Apart from the obvious hyperbole, which farmers with any experience would reject, the image of fertility has an enduring attraction. Watching a deer cross the field on a frosty winter morning, seeing the first green shoots of a new crop pushing through dark soil, standing under the vast flaming canopy of a prairie sunset, farmers continue to express a sense of being in touch with the heart of creation, even with God. On the farm the world seems fresh, more genuine in a certain way. During the summers I spent on my uncle’s farm as a child I would often open the old trap door in the floor of the wash room and climb down the rickety ladder into the root cellar. Standing among the turnips, potatoes, carrots and parsnips all slumbering in earthy beds was somehow like getting “inside” creation. I felt as though I were in touch with Reality, in its unclothed, unbroken fecundity. Baltaz reports similar feelings among the farmers she interviewed. One woman commented, “There’s certainly a peace on the tractor when you’re turning over the soil. You can smell its freshness, sense the beginning of something new....”\(^\text{11}\) There is a touch of millennialism in this metaphor, a sense that one is touching the borders of, if not fully grasping, the peaceable kingdom.

The “pioneer” metaphor is perhaps the most compelling of the three. Canadian farmers, particularly in the west, are rarely less than two or three generations removed from the immigrant ancestors who settled the land. The yearning of those displaced people for land of their own, for a place to put down roots and a heritage to pass on to their children, seems little diminished in their modern descendants. Brenda Mason, who runs a dairy farm with her husband, speaks of the “roots of the land in us”. She says, “When you are forced off the land—even if you choose to leave—it’s like something that is planted deep inside you is just being ripped out.”\(^\text{12}\)

Hard work is also part of the metaphor. My maternal grandparents were pioneers in southern Alberta. The early
years for them were unremitting labour. (To his last days Grandpa refused to go to pioneer museums because the old implements reminded him of that endless toil.) The sort of head down, hard-slogging determination that it took for them to build a home, break the land, and survive the bone-chilling winters has become a shining virtue in rural culture. To this day farmers work longer hours on the farm than most professionals spend at their jobs, and a third of them work off the farm as well. But it is a source of pride. Baltaz notes that, "Long hours in the barn or in the field at harvest time for a proportionately lower income is a status symbol. Although all farmers agree they deserve more money for the hours of work they put in, they also agree their condition is the mark of being a farmer."^{13}

The pioneer metaphor also carries with it a sense that "we are all just folks together". It conveys the image of a society without significant social gradations. The fact that a quarter of land could be had for free if one could "prove it up" gave the impression that the playing field was level. In fact, however, pioneer society included many non-landed workers who were clearly regarded as lower class. The basis for any equality was the ownership of land. Even then, after the first decade of settlement, social gradations between farmers based on size of farm, personality, religion and ethnicity quickly developed. Although there is little evidence that real social equality lasted more than five or ten years, the sense that the ownership of land is the foundation for social acceptance remains.^{14}

These metaphors gain some of their tenacity from their mutual reinforcement by two value systems that are deeply rooted in the founding of our country. The first is that of "free enterprise". In the American context, Frederick Jackson Turner has articulated what is now a classic conception of the frontier as a place that attracted the ambitious, innovative, and self-sufficient—entrepreneurs. Assuming the frontier to be the great equalizer in human affairs, he pictured it as the natural ground for healthy economic competition in which talent and industry would inevitably win out.^{15} As I shall presently show, this concept is grossly naive and the conditions for the exercise of "free" enterprise on a field of equal opportunity no longer exist. However, the idea that competition among small-scale farmers is beneficial for consumers, and is essential to "weed
out" inefficient producers, is still pervasive in Canada as well as the U.S.

The other value system, already alluded to, is the complex of Victorian morals that undergirds the Protestant "work ethic". Promoted and reinforced by the church, it lent a moral imperative to the hard work of the pioneer. Those who became wealthy and successful were presumed to be strong, hard-working, and virtuous. Those who were slothful, irresolute, unable to control their passions would surely reap poverty and misery. In this view, the poor were people of little moral fibre.

It is not difficult to understand the combined message of these metaphors: The land is an unfailing source of life, the fount of prosperity. Owning it is the badge of one's social acceptance; farming it successfully is the mark of one's virtue and strength. Those who fail are not deserving of its rewards, nor of the community's esteem.

Echoing these themes the bankrupt farmer says to himself or herself: "It was my fault. If only I had worker harder, made better decisions. Now I have no place in this community. And without the land I feel disabled, like an essential part of me has been amputated. I am worthless, maimed, ashamed."

**Facing Reality**

Part of dealing with shame is facing reality. Is it true that the land is an unfailing source of bounty, that opportunities are equal, that competition benefits farmers, that one's own abilities are the primary determinant of success?

The first question is not hard to answer. The farmers who settled the arid lands of "Palliser's Triangle" in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan discovered that the government's "free land" was no gift; those who made it to the 1930s found themselves in a dustbowl. Similarly across the country, rocky ground, early winters, weeds, pests, disease, hail, floods—a host of natural disasters—lie in wait to dash farmers' hopes. In spite of genetically improved crops and animals, in spite of herbicides and pesticides, the environment continues to take its toll. In fact, the modern tendency to produce a single product ("monoculture") creates an even greater vulnerability to product-specific problems than in earlier years.

Nor does the land dispense its goodness fairly. One farmer receives the rain and sun in the measures and at the times
needed; the crop of a neighbour, ten miles down the road, is dry and burnt.

Nonetheless, the image of unlimited bounty (and presumably the commensurate profit one can make by selling it) continues to fuel the Canadian dream that agricultural production can be increased without limit. The two World Wars provided a boost. They created sharp rises in the demand for food and generated huge technological advances that were easily applied to farming. Since then Canadians have come to see their land as “the breadbasket of the world”. Even in the face of stupendous surpluses, we continue to believe that we are (morally) responsible to feed the world. As a result, our rural economy has been geared up for export. In 1928, for example, Canadian wheat sales constituted nearly half of the world export market. Today, although our market share has declined, the emphasis is the same. The 1981 and 1989 government “agri-food” strategies entitled respectively “Challenges for Growth” and “Growing Together” continue to stress the importance of increasing production.

Canada’s approach to expanding production has rested on three pillars: the assumptions that bigger farms are more efficient, that machines can do the job better and faster, and that the land is there to be used for the satisfaction of this generation’s desires. The effect of such policies on the fertility of the land has been disastrous. The use of heavy machinery has tended to pulverize the soil and leave it vulnerable to erosion. Fertilizers have allowed continuous cropping that mines the land’s nutrients without returning much of the fibre and minerals it needs to be healthy. Herbicides and pesticides have built up in the ground water to dangerous levels in some places. While there can be no suggestion that Canadians return to nineteenth century farming practices, neither can we take the government’s assertion that “agriculture is not sustainable without modern technology” without a grain of salt.

The truth is, for reasons both natural and humanly-created, our land is no longer an agricultural paradise. It is a precious, but endangered resource (that belongs to our grandchildren as well as to us), in need of protection and rehabilitative care.

What about the second question? Is it true that given equivalent environmental situations, the opportunities for success in farming are equal? It seems not. If anything, a twisted
version of “those who have much will receive more and those who have little will lose what they have”, prevails. For example, the 1991 census for Saskatchewan shows that the top 15% of farms reported 49% of gross receipts while the bottom 31% of farms reported only 4.6% of gross receipts. While these figures are not exactly comparable because capital is not included in the above, a Saskatchewan government survey in the early 1930s reveals that the disparity then was much less—the top 15% of farmers possessed only 30% of farm wealth and the bottom 33% possessed 18% of farm wealth.\(^{19}\) The rich seem to be getting richer and the poor poorer. This is reflected in other ways as well. Since 1941 the number of farms in Canada has declined by 62% (a loss of 452,789 farms). Almost all of that loss has come from farms in the 130 to 1000 acre size—the small to medium-sized family farms.

In fact, there are large inequities in access to land, capital, and technical know-how. The government contributes to the problem by distributing assistance on the basis of acreage rather than need or efficiency. Large farms get the lion’s share of the money and many who are doing more with less are penalized.\(^{20}\)

The third question, concerning the benefits of competition, also reveals a gap between metaphor and reality. First of all, seeing themselves as “agrarian capitalists” serves to divide farmers from one another and to limit their ability to act as a group. This is not to say that farmers are unaware of the benefits of collective action. The west particularly has a history of farm protest. Their efforts led to the establishment of the Crow rate, the national wheat board, the co-ops and marketing boards. They were also instrumental in the creation of two political parties—the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation which governed Saskatchewan for a number of years, eventually transmuting into the New Democratic Party, and the Social Credit party which formed a 40-year dynasty in Alberta. Today, the National Farmer’s Union continues to lobby for agricultural reforms. History would seem to indicate that farmers have made the most progress when they worked together using strategies similar to those employed by industrial workers.

In fact, as Ingolf Vogeler points out in The Myth of the Family Farm, small farmers are much more like urban industrial workers than agrarian capitalists. They produce large
amounts of excess value by their labour (up to four times what industrial workers produce). Most of this goes to the agribusinesses that supply their inputs and process their outputs. Many of these are transnational corporations that lobby for policies that will keep the price of commodities low so that they can make maximum profits through international trading and food processing. The net effect is that the price received by the farm for its products does not reflect the real costs (including the replenishment of the land) that have been put into production. To survive, farmers subsidize the selling price of their products with their own and their family’s unpaid labour and from wages earned off-farm. The return on their investment (if one can call it that since it includes wages) amounts to only 3.3% on average (much less for some) after inputs are paid for. To a great extent then, farmers function more like agribusiness corporation employees than the owners of businesses.

However, farmers find it difficult to live in such an ambivalent role. As often as not, the attitude scales tip in favour of isolation and competition. Mechanization has had a role in this. The threshing and silo crews of several decades ago have been replaced by combines and augers that a single farmer can operate. Farmers have fewer opportunities to contribute to each other’s operations. Yet history shows the value of such connections. A study by Lyle Dyck reveals that in the early years of prairie settlement the key factor that determined success in “proving up” was the solidarity of the communities. Those who could rely on their communities to help them through difficult times survived even on poor land while less cohesive communities couldn’t make it on much more fertile ground.

While that sort of support is still in evidence where farmers have joined together in farm gate defence or penny auctions or for emotional encouragement, it is not common. Too often in the case of bankruptcy, a very painful kind of “cannibalism” can take place as neighbours vie for the opportunity to buy up the foreclosed land and machinery.

The real effect of competition, if farm size statistics are any indication, has been to remove small-scale farmers, allowing large producers to move in and monopolize production.

The final question is perhaps the one that has made the greatest contribution to the shaming of dispossessed farmers.
Is it true that it is possible for a farmer to be successful on the basis of hard work and ability alone? Is a farmer’s destiny really in his or her own hands? This is a foolish question in a way. Farmers are not naive about the larger forces that affect them and, as I indicated, have actively worked together to confront them. But this very awareness seems to lead them to dismiss the determinative influence of these factors. After all, a bankrupt farmer looks around at his or her neighbours and sees that most of them are in relatively good shape. He or she knows that all of them are subject to these same forces. The conclusion easily drawn is that personal abilities, hard work, or talent must make the difference.

In fact, the difference between financial success and failure often has little to do with one’s personal abilities. According to a Farm Credit Corporation study, there is no evidence that it is the inefficient farms which are being forced out of production. The farms in the most serious trouble are those that happened to borrow capital to begin or expand their operation just before interest rates skyrocketed in the late 1970s. Other farmers, who did the same thing earlier, or later, did not face those huge charges. In fact, the FCC found that financial distress tended to tighten up the efficiency of farms to the point that those in the most financial trouble had the greatest production per acre.

In addition, farmers are often not aware of the extent to which the removal of “weak” farmers has been a deliberate policy of government and financial institutions. In its 1969 paper “Agriculture in the Seventies” the Canadian government said that because of a surplus of agricultural production and the fact that a third of the farmers in Canada were living below the poverty line, it was going to “wage war on farm poverty” by removing two-thirds of Canada’s farmers (presumably the poorest) by 1990. They have almost succeeded. In 1969, nine percent of the Canadian population lived on the farm; by 1991 it was down to 3.2 percent. At the moment, the emigration has slowed as those most affected by the high interest rates, drought and low grain prices of the 1980s have already gone. But the recent GATT agreement which our government signed promises to renew the exodus. As marketing boards and tariff restrictions are phased out over the next five years, dairy and poultry farmers particularly will lose the money they put into
Farmers

purchasing quotas (which will no longer apply) and they will be faced with much reduced prices for their products as our markets are opened to cheaper U.S. milk and chicken.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that the banks have also often followed the "weeding out" policy. Bob King, for example, reports that the day he sat down with his banker, supposedly in good faith, to begin negotiations that he thought were intended to help him keep the farm, he discovered that a document authorizing the power of sale of his farm had already been sent. Ken Kelly, his financial consultant, comments that, "One of the things it seems to me that lenders try to do is teach the farmer that he has absolutely no options but to get out of the business.... We don't look at wholistic solutions." 30

Many distressed farmers find themselves struggling with apathy and despair because they have bought the line that they are a surplus people. Diane Baltaz reports that those who "sweat whenever they meet their bank manager on the street" often said, "Perhaps they're right; maybe there are too many of us."

This is the shame—that small family farmers, faced with an array of global forces that shape their financial futures in ways they cannot avoid, should continue to be treated, and to see themselves, as the ultimate arbiters of their fate. Yet that same sense of responsibility, the tenacity and love of the land—in other words those deep-rooted images of frontier and land of plenty and pioneer—keep them farming when the odds are stacked against them.

The Church and the Farmer

The church has a real challenge here. In identifying global influences on the farm crisis the church must not replace the strong traditional, if no longer adequate, metaphors with that of the farmer as victim. To do so would disempower farmers further and fail to affirm the proud history of reforms that farmers have initiated. What we can do is affirm their courage and self-reliance, but place their struggle into the context of community. One financial manager commented, "No way should the farmer be the only one to bear the brunt and the punishment and the pain. Everyone helped him to get to where he got. Everyone has a responsibility to help him get back into viability." 31
That is where the church can begin—by accepting responsibility for its own contribution to the problem. At the very least, every church member has benefitted substantially from the cheap food that farmers subsidize. By publicly acknowledging shared responsibility from the pulpit, in workshops and discussion groups, in civic forums, the church takes its place alongside farmers. It shares the shame, not innocently as its Lord did, but with the same desire for redemptive change. In this sense, the church has the opportunity to be an alternative community, a place where one’s social position is not paramount, where honour can be recovered. John Otto, a Lutheran farmer, reports that when he lost his farm he was embarrassed to return to church, afraid that people would look down on him. But he had had expressions of support, and he says that although it was hard at first, he found a place of purpose and esteem in his congregation that helped him get on his feet again.

The church can also play an important role in helping farmers move beyond shame to engage the conflict. Initially, the discussion may be relatively closed. Many farmers in trouble will trust their stories only to those who are in trouble themselves or, like John Otto, have already been dispossessed. In such secure settings the fear of betrayal is reduced. However, as shame gives way to purposeful anger, the church can host a broader conversation. It is an institution that is less entangled than most in our society’s economic and political systems. As such it can offer a relatively neutral space for discussion and a framework for the fruitful engagement (if not reconciliation) of competing interests.

Such a space is essential if only because bankers, government agents, agribusiness employees and farmers must live together in the same small communities and the same congregations. To a certain degree all contribute to the problems and to a greater or lesser extent all are caught in the squeeze. It is also necessary because among farmers themselves there is a great diversity of opinion as to what changes are needed and how they should be pursued. Some advocate radical systemic changes (similar to the position of the National Farmer’s Union). Others are more in favor of gradual reform (perhaps characterized by The Canadian Federation of Agriculture or, more recently, the Wheat Pools).
The first of these perspectives is characteristic of the "prophetic" tradition of social analysis. It is suspicious of empires, alert to conflict, human rights and the misuse of power. Its ears are tuned to the voices of suffering and its eyes are focused on the vision of a just society. Prophets call us to a holy restlessness with the moderate gains we make, looking always beyond them to a new humanity.

The other approach is reformist. It is more sensitive to the positive contributions that the various elements of society make to the whole. It takes the ambiguity of our situation seriously. It does not attempt to leap the gap between present reality and eschatological future in a single bound, but undertakes what is practically possible in complex reality.\(^\text{32}\)

As Christians reflect theologically on such social analysis, the prophetic voices among them tend to speak of land as a form of social power, given by God to be used justly and imaginatively for the satisfaction of human needs and the care of creation. They might recall the story of manna as a reminder that food is not simply a commodity to be traded or stored but a gift of God meant for all. They would find in the exodus story a promise that the dispossessed will again have a place where they belong, a land where their hearts can take permanent root.

A reformist perspective might draw on the ambiguities of Israel’s experience with land. It would remind us that Solomon’s selfish grasping for land led to exile, while Abram’s obedient trust in the promise led to land freely given. It recognizes the importance of having turf but does not absolutize it.\(^\text{33}\)

Discussion between people beginning from such different places is obviously difficult. Church leaders cannot presume to arbitrate between them. But they can offer a framework for fruitful (if heated) engagement.

Roger Hutchinson outlines a process that I think can be helpful. He proposes that the conversation begin by having each participant tell their own story, complete, without debate or comment. Out of this context, discussion could then move down through several levels, beginning with a clarification of the facts. The "facts" would then be opened up to reveal the values which underlie them, allowing their moral consequences to be debated. Finally, Hutchinson suggests, any such discussion would include a clear confession of one’s deepest convictions, sources of authority, and identity.\(^\text{34}\)
Such conversation between diverse perspectives has led to important reforms in Canadian history. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) came into being out of that kind of dialogue. It developed as a coalition of Christian clergy, farmers, urban labourers, and professionals. The CCF left behind a legacy of farm reforms and a much-valued medicare system from which we continue to benefit.

One conversation that holds the possibility of generating particularly potent action is that between rural and urban churches. Urban centres are often places where “exiled” farmers and people of economic and political power come in contact with each other. It seems to me that urban pastors who have been alerted to rural realities and are aware of farm people in their communities have an opportunity to create space for dialogue that could spark significant change.

The above reflections are not intended to suggest a program for solving the farm crisis or for lifting the burden of shame that dispossessed farmers bear. They are, however, a city-born pastor’s effort to understand some of the causes of the distress and to be a better catalyst for support and change. The research has certainly reset some of my attitudes. It has also encouraged me to search with my parishioners for new metaphors of farm life that are affirming and empowering.35

Notes
1 Where the Rose Grows, a play produced by the Melita Rural Life Support Group, explores the secrecy and shame from teens’ point of view. It is available on video from the Melita Rural Theatre Group, Box 29 Sinclair, MB, ROM 2AO.

2 One in ten farmers reports having considered suicide, according to “Canada’s Farm Crisis,” Praxis 2 (Fall 1988), 1–3 (no byline). The video production Borrowed Time (Toronto, ON: 49 North Productions, Inc., 1990) claims that one in three male farm deaths is suicide. The farm suicide rate is twice the national average according to the Presbyterian Farm Crisis Committee [see their video Family Farm Under Receivership (London, ON: CFPL-TV, no date)]. Sara E. Wright and Paul C. Rosenblatt have an excellent article on why community support declines and how to deal with it in “Isolation and Farm Loss: Why Neighbors may not be Supportive,” Family Relations, 36 (1987) 391–395.

3 Interestingly, he notes that farmers’ spouses, if they are doing the bookkeeping and not directly managing the farm operations, are sometimes
willing to talk more openly about the family’s financial crisis. This  
may be one of the few open doors, though any effort to talk to a spouse  
apart from the farmer would probably be perceived as betrayal.

4 Diane P. Baltaz, Living Off the Land: A Spirituality of Farming (Ot-  

5 Ibid.

6 Paul Ricouer, The Rule of Metaphor (Toronto: University of Toronto  
Press, 1977) esp. 65ff; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We  
Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) esp. 3–9; see also  
R. Bellah, “Transcendence in Contemporary Piety,” in Beyond Belief  

7 Gerald Friesen, Canadian Prairies: A History (Toronto: University of  
Toronto Press, 1984) 104.

8 Robert Ballantyne, The Young Fur Traders (London: n.d.) 200–201,  
cited in Friesen, Canadian Prairies, 105.

9 Baltaz, Living Off the Land, 38.

10 The posters appear in Harold Coward and Leslie Kawamura, eds., Re-  
ligion and Ethnicity (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press,  

11 Baltaz, Living Off the Land, 48.

12 From the video, Borrowed Time.

13 Baltaz, Living Off the Land, 18.

14 See Gerald Friesen, The Canadian Prairies, 96, 311.

15 See especially his article “The Significance of the Frontier in American  
History,” in Frontier and Section: Selected Essays (Englewood Cliffs,  


17 Friesen, Canadian Prairies, 301. Donna Kerpan, a Saskatchewan  
farmer, expresses it in Living Off the Land, 152, when she says, “If  
we’re ever to feed the world, we better give agriculture the first prior-  
ity. We have the ability, technology and the will—almost the will—to  
be the greatest food producers in the world.”

18 From the 1989 Agriculture Canada policy entitled “Growing Together—  
a Vision for Canada’s Agri-food Industry,” p. 31. The foolishness of  
the statement is self-evident. It is in fact only with the advent of modern  
technology that we have been able to mine the earth so thoroughly  
that its resources are in danger of exhaustion. Between 1971 and 1991,  
expenditures (not inflation-adjusted) on fertilizer rose 1000%, and on  
herbicides, insecticides and fungicides rose 2000%. The number of acres  
covered also increased from 18% of total crop land to 53% in this same  
period of time. However, there are hopeful signs: the 1991 census  
reports a slight drop from the 1986 census in acres covered. This is the  
first time since 1971 that an increase has not been reported.

19 See Friesen, The Canadian Prairies, 317.

For an interesting, though very negative, exploration of the influence of one such corporation see Brewster Kneen, Trading Up: How Cargill, the World’s Largest Trading Company, is Changing Canadian Agriculture (Toronto: NC Press, 1990).


I have seen the effects of this in my own parish. Art Craig, the last of a five-generation farm in PEI that went bankrupt speaks of the vultures descending to pick over his family’s carcass in the video Family Farm Under Receivership.


Note that this statement hides the fact that, though the rate varies with the year, between 15 and 30% of farmers are in serious financial difficulty. If we had unemployment figures at those rates for urban areas the outcry would be deafening. No one would be commenting on how good it was that we had 70 or 80% of our people working.

It is interesting that government programs intended to help in this situation were really a bailout of the banks. James Hewitt, Farm Credit Corporation chairman, comments, “We acquired a lot of loans from the bank under specific programs, and those were high risk loans and those were the first ones to fail when we got into 1983, ’84, ’85.” Hewitt does not say that they forgave those loans once they acquired them, or that they did not foreclose—only that they made sure the banks would not have to absorb any losses. See Borrowed Time.

The study is reported in McCrea and Furtan, “Income Distribution,” 249.

Marvin Anderson in “Going, Going, Gone: Selling the Family Farm,” Our Times (March 1986), 26–31, reports on this policy paper. Anderson also notes that in the mid-80s Canada introduced the $46 million Canadian Rural Transition Program designed to help 9000 farmers find other work. One might cynically ask whether the program is designed to alleviate stress for farmers already committed to leaving the land, or to encourage those who are wavering to leave peaceably. Whatever the motives, it is clear that the government is committed to helping farmers move off the land.

From the video Borrowed Time.

Ibid.

See Cranford Pratt’s discussion of these positions in “Faith and Social Action” in Cranford Pratt and Roger Hutchinson, eds., Christian Faith
Walter Brueggemann, in “The earth is the Lord’s: A theology of earth and land,” Sojourners (October 1986), 8–12 points out that there is an important tension in the Hebrew word “eretz”. It can be translated “earth” or “land”. As “earth” it suggests the eternal, non-historical ownership of all things by God. This perspective is sometimes used by large landholders to justify the present distribution of land—as if those with land had been appointed by God to manage it and had not acquired it through social means. As “land” the term suggests that use of the land has been determined by conflict and power-struggles, that it is located in history and social relations. Sometimes this perspective is used to justify violent appropriation of land. Both translations are necessary, Brueggemann suggests. The former relativizes all monopolies, reminding us that if the land is Yahweh’s it must be used according to Yahweh’s will—i.e., justly and equitably. The latter frees us to employ human creativity in our social construction of the land, to experiment responsibly, as Israel did with the year of Jubilee. Brueggemann feels that this is the area that has not been given adequate attention by Christian theology—i.e., the imagination of just ways to provide land for the landless. See also Brueggemann, The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). It is interesting to note that some imaginative ventures in community land trusts are being explored right now in Manitoba by the United Church.


One recent attempt to do this is Patrick Slattery’s Caretakers of Creation: Farmers Reflect on their Faith and Work (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1991).