

Prologue

1. We are witnessing profound and disturbing changes in rural America. Land ownership is being restructured, agricultural production is becoming more heavily industrialized and concentrated in fewer hands¹ and the earth all too frequently is being subjected to harmful farming, mining and development practices. Such changes are adversely affecting our rural people, their way of life, their land and the wider national and international communities which depend on them to satisfy their hunger.

2. A generation ago, we could see throughout the region innumerable owner-operated family farms, stable and thriving communities, seemingly limitless prime soil and extensive areas of natural beauty. But this picture has changed. On much of the rural landscape now we see deserted and dilapidated farm buildings, dying communities, eroding soil, urban sprawl, and mining scars.

3. We are concerned about this transformation on the land in America's most productive agricultural region. We have seen people leave the land, churches and schools emptied, and communities condemned to decay. We must ask: Why is this happening?; and: What might be done about it?

4. We have searched our religious heritage to see how members of the Judaeo-Christian community have responded to similar situations in previous eras. Their voices speak to us from ages past; we seek to utilize their insights in our present historical moment. Of particular importance for us are their perspectives on the traditional Judaeo-Christian concept of stewardship of the land and its resources.

5. Our reflections on our situation and our tradition have led us to speak out, not only for ourselves but also and especially for those who have no voice, for those who have suffered most from changes in the rural scene: family farmers, farmworkers, Native Americans and the world's hungry. We have heard their cries of anger and pain. We have

heard them plead for justice. We wish to respond to that plea. We realize that the first social priority of the church is to be concerned about the most downtrodden members of society, those with whom Jesus identified himself in Matthew's Gospel:

I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink.
I was away from home and you gave me welcome,
Naked and you gave me clothing.
I was ill and in prison and you came to comfort me...
I assure you, as often as you did it to one of these least ones,
You did it to me. (Matthew 25:35-6,40)

We wish not only to fulfill this mandate of the Lord, but also to help empower people to control their own destiny, to be no longer powerless but rather participants in the creation of a new society based on justice.²

6. Because of the importance of our region as the agricultural heartland of the United States and as a major source of the grain exported to the global community, and because we recognize that we are called by God to be concerned about the hungry at home and abroad: we declare that our regional efforts on behalf of the "least ones" must include our affirmation of their right to food and our commitment to help them overcome their hunger.³

7. We are concerned about the people and land in our region. The opportunity people have to live a productive and rewarding life is determined to a great extent by the way in which they or outside interests relate to the land. We wish this relationship to be one of cooperative harmony, for the land -- complemented in nature by water and air -- is our most important and limited natural resource. We are concerned that this resource in its productive capacity be conserved to benefit present and future generations at home and abroad. We are concerned that its natural beauty and healthful environment be conserved to benefit present and future generations of the people of our region.

8. We realize that we are addressing very complex issues. We hope that the moral values and practical policies which we suggest here, however, will be sufficiently focused as to penetrate to the very heart of those issues, and lead to the social reforms that are necessary to preserve our land and the best of our heritage, and promote justice for our people.

9. We present this statement with two goals in mind: first, to evangelize the heartland: to preach the good news of God's concern for

the people and the land and to stimulate people to respond creatively to that good news and effect justice in land use and distribution; second, to suggest ways in which people might work with and through legislative bodies to promote stewardship of the land if our efforts at moral persuasion fail.

10. We believe that while we evangelize others we must also evangelize ourselves. We resolve to be more conscious of our own responsibility to be stewards of the land as well as pastors of the people on the land.

11. We offer this statement to the heartland people. We thank those of you who helped us to formulate it through your critical comments at the diocesan hearings. We pray that God will guide and strengthen us as we struggle together for justice in the heartland.