

THE RURAL CRISIS: An assault on the dignity of agricultural work

Adopted by the Commission, 19 June 1991

The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) calls on the Members of both Houses of the Commonwealth Parliament to urge the Minister for Primary Industry and Energy to take remedial action, either directly or in cooperation with the relevant State and Territorial authorities, against the worsening rural crisis in Australia.

The Lutheran Church of Australia sees remedial action from a threefold perspective, ie

- a) the dignity of agricultural work;
- b) the social and socio-moral problems resulting directly and indirectly from an economic crisis;
- c) the policies related to rural development which make the 'farmer family' redundant in a macro-economic environment.

The Dignity of Agricultural Work

The church upholds the principle of the dignity of work, since work is one of the primary mandates given by God to humankind. Agricultural work, which provides the necessary goods for society's daily sustenance, is of 'fundamental importance'. The well-being of Australia's rural community is vital for the social and economic health of the whole community, because the rural economy is inextricably linked with the economic well-being of the whole country.

Agricultural work in our country has been enhanced by the results of government and privately sponsored scientific research. Technological action and government policies have helped to develop agriculture to advanced levels. However, if farmers and agricultural workers are no longer able to advance socially, culturally and economically, and if they do not receive a just reward for their labours, we must seriously look at alternative policies which would benefit the rural community.

If our present primary industry policies no longer advance the well-being of our farmers and agricultural workers, then new policies, based upon the recognition of the dignity of agricultural work and oriented towards a strengthening of our efforts at halting the current crisis, need to be formulated and implemented.

The Social and Socio-Moral Problems resulting directly and indirectly from an Economic Crisis

The signs of the seriousness of the rural crisis are widely recognised. The rise in unemployment, incidence of negative incomes, of bankruptcy, family breakdown and serious mental health problems are well documented. Decreases in the provision of

community services and the demoralisation of rural communities are no longer anecdotal occurrences but visible realities.

It is of paramount importance to recognise that the causes of the rural crisis are not to be found only in droughts and mismanagement, and their consequences. Our current primary industry policies need to be carefully re-evaluated in the light of the overall state of the economy, the performance of our banking and other lending institutions, high interest rates, and the low returns for our Australian agricultural products in relation to the high expenditure of agricultural production. Subsidy policies in the US and Europe are having a marked negative effect on the Australian agricultural enterprise, endangering its viability.

The church recommends that the government, through its Department for Primary Industries and Energy, give greater priority to rural assistance schemes and other measures of an economic nature which would prevent the dislocation of people in our rural communities.

The Policies related to Rural Development which Endanger the Family Farm in a Macro-Economic Environment.

The church recognises that the rural downturn is not simply due to the recent decline in commodity prices. It is also related to the major structural transformation that is taking place in rural Australia. In this restructuring the numbers of family farms and the populations of rural towns is in decline, while agribusiness is on the rise.

Underlying these structural changes is an economic philosophy based on growth. Encouraged by banks, government advisers and agribusinesses, many farmers have borrowed heavily to purchase more land and bigger machinery to increase production. When farmers with high debt levels experienced a drop in commodity prices, soaring interest rates and extended drought, some were forced to sell their properties and many are having great difficulty in carrying on.

Present policies regarding trade in agricultural products are contributing significantly to the difficulties experienced by farmers. The Australian government has been at the forefront in the global move to remove subsidies and import restrictions on agricultural products. Unfortunately, this commendable move has exposed our producers to unfair competition in both domestic and overseas markets.

In this situation the questions need to be asked: What vision does the government have for rural Australia? Will we continue to have family farms which sustain rural towns and their inherent values, or will family farms be replaced by large agricultural enterprises? Given our fragile environment, can we afford the environmental cost that agribusiness brings? While maintaining the goal of free trade, can we continue to expect our rural producers to compete on unequal terms with their European and American counterparts?

In the light of the church's earlier observations, that the well-being of Australia's rural community is vital for our social and economic health, the rural sector should not be abandoned by the community-at-large. Without significant community support at this difficult time, many farmers may become long-term, if not permanent, casualties of the current economic recession.

The Lutheran Church of Australia issues this call to the Australian government in solidarity with the country's rural communities. It also calls upon all members of society to contribute, if possible, in positive ways to the alleviation of the current rural

crisis. The church itself pledges to bring the needs of the rural community before God's throne of grace in prayer and, through its pastors and members, will continue to serve, in practical ways, all those in need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The LCA Commission on Social Questions recommends to the General President of the LCA and the various District Presidents the following responses to the rural crisis:

1. that congregations be encouraged to pray regularly for farmers in difficulty and rural communities in decline;
2. that pastors remind people of the similar but even worse plight of many farmers in Third World countries, and remember them also in prayer;
3. that urban congregations be encouraged to organize visits to rural congregations in order to hear and see at first hand some of the difficulties faced by rural people and thereby exhibit solidarity with them;
4. that urban members be encouraged to open their homes to rural families to enable them to have a low-cost holiday;
5. that members be encouraged to assist one another in various practical ways, such as sharing resources or making gifts of money, hay or providing agistment for stock;
6. that pastors and church leaders get to know and make known the services available to those affected by the rural downturn;
7. that members be encouraged to write to state and federal politicians expressing their concern about the plight of rural communities and rural people, particularly those experiencing difficulties with the banks.