Religion

Rabbi warns extremists preying on farm crisis

By Carol Mahnke
STAFF WRITER

Farmers plagued with economic troubles may be susceptible to the "simple answers" offered by radical right groups like the Posse Comitatus, the Aryan Nations and the Christian Identity Movement, according to Rabbi A. James Rudin, national director of the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee.

Rudin is speaking today at a "Holding on to Life" workshop entitled "Rural Economic Distress and the Rise of Religious Extremism" at the Family Life Center, North Dakota State University.

The workshop is sponsored by the NDSU Campus Ministry, including the Newman Center, United Campus Ministry, the University Lutheran Center and the YMCA of NDSU. Temple Beth El in Fargo also is a sponsor.

"Everybody would like to believe the problems are simple," he said in an interview Wednesday.

But the economic problems and the social problems spawned by the failing farm economy — domestic violence, suicide, alcoholism — are very complex issues, Rudin said.

He described extremism as a "virus" and urges church and farm organizations to be aware of the threat it poses to distressed, vulnerable farmers.

Rudin characterizes farmers as a minority group in the United States. They comprise only 3 percent of the national population.

As a matter of fact, Rudin said, Jewish people are 3 percent of the population.

"I can understand what it feels like to be the butt of a joke," Rudin said.

Like other minority groups, farmers often feel isolated and beleaguered, Rudin said.

But most farmers are conscious of the pluralistic nature of American society, he added. They are "overwhelmingly democratic and non-violent."

Some extremist groups are survivalists, hoarding weapons and food. Others are paramilitary and may have training camps in remote areas of the Midwest.

Many urge the violent overthrow of the government. A bumpersticker seen in Iowa and attributed to the Posse Comitatus read "Know Your Leaders; They're Your Enemy," Rudin said.

The Posse Comitatus is the only white supremacist, paramilitary organization currently listed by the FBI as a terrorist organization.

Other groups cited by Rudin were the Populist Party, The Order, The Covenant, Sword, the Arm of the Lord, Liberty Lobby, and the National Agricultural Press Association. The political organization of Lyndon LaRouche is another extremist group which has targeted the economically distressed farm belt, Rudin said.

As the farm crisis deepens, Rudin said, there will be "greater and greater vulnerability" to the rhetoric of extremism.

Rudin believes the Christian Identity Movement, led by Richard Butler, bridges the political and religious extremism.

RABBI A. JAMES RUDIN