Religious groups bring farmers' concerns to the cities

By Darrell Turner
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NEW YORK (RNS) — Religious groups are bringing the concerns of farmers to urban audiences in an effort to demonstrate that the agricultural crisis is a national — not just rural — concern.

A two-day conference on the rural crisis, titled "This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land," is being held Nov. 14-15 at a location seemingly far removed from farm life — Riverside Church in New York City. Co-sponsored by the interdenominational church's Food and Justice Program and the National Council of Churches' Rural Crisis Issue Team, the ecumenical meeting is designed to develop strategies for political advocacy and action. Groups also have organized in the Midwest and West to assist farmers with food, financial aid and counseling.

"Since farm families comprise less than three percent of the U.S. population, the support and advocacy of urban Americans will be needed to secure the future of family farming," said an announcement of the conference.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann, professor of Old Testament at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Ga., is slated to lay the theological groundwork for the meeting on the Judeo-Christian notion of a land as a gift from God. Other speakers will include Helen Waller and Dixon Terry of the National Save the Family Farm Coalition and Rabbi A. James Rudin, national director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

Rabbi Rudin's participation in the conference illustrates the concern of American Jewish groups, most of which are strongest in urban areas, over the emergence of anti-Semitism by extremists seeking to exploit the plight of American farmers. This concern recently helped to launch a joint effort among Women's American ORT, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), and the Kansas City Jewish Community Relations Bureau to circulate petitions supporting federal aid to struggling family farmers in the Midwest.

At a New York press conference at the headquarters of the UAHC, a Reform Jewish organization, David Goldstein of the Kansas City group related that "initially, it was our alarm over anti-Semitic propaganda intended to exploit the frustrations and anxieties of farmers facing economic devastation that led us to examine rural conditions."

Mr. Goldstein added that "in doing so, we learned that thousands of family farmers — 300 a day — were being stripped of their land and their livelihood. We also learned of social instability linked to economic stress — suicides, alcoholism and violence within families."

David Senter, executive director of the American Agricultural Movement, told the press conference that "the farm crisis has become a national crisis affecting everyone, not just rural families. We in the farm community are proud to stand arm in arm with the Jewish community."

Home visits between farmers and townsfolk are being organized by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon to promote mutual understanding. Barbara J. George, associate director of the ecumenical agency, said the program, called Common Ground, is meant to give townsfolk a better understanding of farm problems and give farmers places to stay without charge when they have to go to town for a few days.
Ironically, Mrs. George said, EMO is also buying food for farmers who don't have any. The interchurch organization was allotted $15,000 of the money raised by singer Willie Nelson in his benefit concerts, and most of it has been used to purchase food for farmers.

The Catholic Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., has established a toll-free emergency hotline for farmers. The hotline is answered at the home of Deacon Orvell DeBruin, who provides information on legal and financial assistance, as well as moral and spiritual support.

"So often we have heard the statement that the church is not doing anything" to help farmers, Deacon DeBruin said. "I think with this we are trying to help in any way we can."

Another aspect of religious efforts to help farmers is to combat the stereotype that farmers are to blame for their own problems. "It is a question of loans, a financial crisis, conservation, land ownership and control and the like," said Mrs. George of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. "Many of these things are beyond the control of local farmers. Many farmers don't understand this; they think it is their fault and become withdrawn."

Similarly, the petition being circulated by the Jewish organization says, "Some people have blamed farmers for their problems. From our historical experience, we know how inaccurate and unfair it is when the victims are blamed."