CHICAGO, Feb. 11....Chicago seems an unlikely place to discuss the current crisis in rural America. Indeed, the big city's bustle and its densely populated landscape are a far cry from the serene, open spaces of the countryside.

But as participants in the Interreligious Conference on Rural Life, held February 8 and 9 at Chicago's Blackstone Hotel, agreed, the economic and spiritual despair sweeping through America's family farms today promises to send shock waves to every segment of American society and overseas.

"The threat to economic viability and political stability doesn't stop at the doorsteps of a few hundred farmers," Rev. John Pawlikowski, professor of social ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, told the conference, calling for a coalition of rural and urban leaders to address the farm crisis.

"Because of the entrepreneurial nature of family farming, there is often a tendency for farmers to 'go it alone,'" said Rabbi A. James Rudin, national director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee. "By sharing the pain, and by establishing institutions and organizations of collective welfare, the crisis can be more effectively confronted and real solutions found."

Sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the National Council of Churches, Rural Crisis Issues Team, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and several other Christian groups and farm advocacy agencies, the conference addressed the ongoing trend toward the extinction of small and moderate-sized family farms and the growing presence in rural communities of hate groups who peddle grand theories of racism and of a "Jewish conspiracy" to bankrupt the American farmer. The conference also issued a declaration, the first of its kind to emerge from such an interreligious gathering, that identifies the problems of rural America and calls for solutions through action and public policy.

America's farms are today going through their worst economic period since the Great Depression. Farm foreclosures have become increasingly commonplace over the last five or six years. And, as farms fail, the infrastructure of the rural economy comes apart with them. Rural banks, stricken by one defaulted farm loan after another, eventually close their doors. Local dealers -- and

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ultimately manufacturers based in urban centers -- of farm machinery, fertilizers and chemicals, seeds and other agricultural supplies feel the crunch and livelihoods are lost. Tax revenues decline for schools, health care and public works projects. Children of farming families, perhaps the farm's most valuable long-term resource, are increasingly leaving the rural towns for careers in urban areas where opportunity seems greatest.

"The economic base of many rural communities is very fragile," said William Heffernan, professor of rural sociology at the University of Missouri and a co-chairman of the conference along with J. David Levy, president of the American Jewish Committee's St. Louis Chapter. "The loss of any major income source often leads to a community financial crisis. In some Missouri communities the farm crisis is exacerbated because local industries have also closed. Even though many rural industries pay relatively low wages, when farm families lose this source of non-farm income, the survival of their farms becomes even less certain."

Explanations for what caused the current crisis vary. Yet most agree that a dangerous combination of over-expansion in the 1970s, when the U.S. Agriculture Dept. encouraged farmers to plant crops "fencrow to fencrow," subsequently depressing commodity prices, and soaring interest rates during the 80s, left the farmers with staggering debt loads. At the same time, the value of farm land, offered to banks as collateral, was declining throughout rural America.

Professor Heffernan pointed to the rising dominance of large agri-business in food production industries as another key contributor to the erosion of the family farm. This growing concentration of the agricultural market share into the hands of fewer firms, which can operate at larger economies of scale, has made it tougher for smaller farms to compete.

Large agri-business not only has great strength in its markets but also in the political arena. Current public policies (for instance, federal subsidies that keep commodity prices lower so they will be more saleable on the world markets) have been structured in favor of the large farms, said Dixon Terry, an Iowa farmer and chairman of the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition.

U.S. Senator Paul Simon, a Democrat from Illinois, addressed the conference and recommended federal policies that would help restore the family farms through target pricing for farm commodities and research into cheaper means of production. Senator Simon supports the Harkin-Gephart Bill, intended principally to aid the family farm. He also touted his newly introduced jobs program, reminiscent of Franklin Roosevelt's WPA and CCC, that would be an incentive for bankrupt farmers to stay in rural areas instead of looking for work in the cities. He also called for a "genuine" conservation program to preserve precious topsoil and water, and for a longterm national farm policy.

The effects of the family farm crisis, said several conference speakers, are not just economic but also spiritual. Suicide, alcoholism and child and spouse abuse are on the rise in many farm communities.
Susan Denzer, executive director of the Illinois South Project, which advocates for and assists farmers in southern and central Illinois, said that emotional depression was prevalent in the communities she serves. "They feel they've been betrayed by the lenders and the government," Ms. Denzer said. "Many withdraw from their communities, and as they do, their feelings of isolation fester. They become more susceptible to ideas not based on reason."

Many of those advocating "ideas not based on reason" travel like medicine-show salesmen through failing farm towns. They pitch racist and anti-Semitic ideology and sell bogus legal and financial cures. Generally, their message, often veiled behind biblical and political references, is that Jews control the machinery of the international banking industry and have somehow conspired to trigger the current farm crisis in the U.S.

Leonard Zeskind, research director for the Center for Democratic Renewal, an organization that monitors the activities of hate groups, said about the farm-belt extremist groups:

"Mainly they're pushing phony legal scams or organizing politically. The violent aspect of the movement is more confined, though their message advocating the stockpiling of weapons is usually not."

Numerous groups -- with names like Aryan Nations, Posse Comitatus, the White Patriot Party, the Manifest Sons of God, the Lord's Covenant Church, the Christian Patriots League, the Populist Party -- operate independently under the principles of a movement known as Christian Identity.

"The overriding feature of this phenomenon is that you're not only talking about individuals or about organizations but about a movement," Mr. Zeskind said. "They go to each other's meetings and collaborate and come to a common assessment of what to do next."

Mr. Zeskind also said that while only a few of these groups have developed a political base strong enough to reach public office, they are "loose cannons rolling around looking for a place to shoot."

"Because of the insidious nature of this movement and because [the supremacists] go to a lot of meetings, it really begins to take root slowly," said Rev. David Ostendorf, executive director of Prairiefire Rural Action, an agency that assists and advocates for farmers in Iowa. "It's a major problem because it's very confusing to people who want to deal rationally with the farm problem."

Discussing the followers of right-wing extremist Lyndon LaRouche, who have organized in southern Illinois farm communities and last spring won several spots on the Illinois Democratic party ticket for state office, Ms. Denzer said: "Most farmers don't really believe a lot of what they are saying, but a lot of the farmers feel they don't have any other direction to turn."

Since the Christian Identity movement began to get public attention about 18 months ago, Mr. Zeskind said, religious groups, such as Rev. Ostendorf's Prairiefire and the American Agricultural Movement, have gone on record against...
the movement and "created a sensitivity that did not exist before." Also, farmers are beginning to realize that they, too, are victims of supremacists who divert attention from legitimate farm issues to their own concerns.

Looking toward ways of carrying out the conference's aims, conference co-chairman Levy said: "Our approach should focus on basic needs. It should at first be aimed at pocketbook issues rather than intangible questions of spirituality. But at some point we should link the pocketbook issues together with the spirituality."

"We might be talking about a social issue instead of just a food issue," said Prof. Heffernan. "But the food issue might be a good place to start."

"We need to identify groups that are working on these kinds of questions and offer them our support," said Dr. Dorothy Berry, executive director of the Consultation of Cooperating Churches in Kansas, an advocacy group for farms. "The faith community must struggle to hold up signs of hope."

Rev. Lee Whiteside, director of the Missouri East Conference Rural Crisis Task Force, echoed Father Pawlikowski's suggestion to form coalitions, particularly between urban and rural groups. "Look for existing self interests and go with your strengths," Rev. Whiteside said. "Go with what draws you together." He also stressed sharing information and forming support groups. "Your decisions are no better than your information," he concluded.

Summarizing the conference's specific plan for action regarding supremacists, Judy Heffernan, also of the University of Missouri, said that we should "stop pretending the extremists don't exist and start calling extremism for what it is." She recommended "identifying the players," and separating the supremacists from the rest. "Otherwise we'll condemn everyone," which can only lead to alienation.

The conferees adopted a declaration that identified the crisis of rural America, linked it with racist and anti-Semitic activities and offered several public policy solutions for these problems: "provide for an adequate, affordable supply of quality food for American consumers; ensure stable and profitable levels of income for family farm producers; encourage the appropriate stewardship of our precious soil and water resources for future generations; ensure adequate earnings for export sales while promoting long term cooperation and stability in world markets; balance supply with demand; eliminate hunger."

The aim of the declaration - and, for that matter, the conference -- was to form a model of response for the group's follow-up work and for other groups interested in similar problems. It also addressed the more fundamental issues behind the farm crisis.

"I hope what we've done here becomes a rallying point for other coalitions addressing this problem," said Harold Applebaum, national director for anti-Semitism and extremism programs for the American Jewish Committee. "My own sense is that the religious community has focused in a large measure on short-term concerns -- alleviation of immediate stress. This should be a vehicle for the religious community to address not only those short-term worries but more long-term issues as well."

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