



The United Church of Canada General Council

GC31 Committee on Agriculture and Food Resources

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Report Excerpts

Across Canada, hundreds of farm families find themselves face-to-face with ruin, caught up in the nation's worst agricultural economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Increasingly, Canadian farmers are trapped in a vicious squeeze exerted by high costs of production, high interest rates, declining land values accompanied by low prices for their produce. As of June 1985, some 34 per cent of all farmers were suffering moderate or severe financial stress accompanied by an even more serious level of emotional stress.

Net farm income has dropped by 14 per cent to \$3.7 billion in 1985. Meanwhile, farmers are carrying more than \$21 billion in debts and face gloomy world markets where they sell up to half of their products.

Ottawa's apparent refusal to consider any sweeping measures to aid beleaguered farmers is seen by some as a sign of an ungrateful nation's indifference to the plight

of its food producers. The farmer seems to be largely ignored. After all, as 4 per cent of the population, the farm vote doesn't count for much.

As in the case of Canada's farming community, Canada's fisheries are also at a crisis point. On the West Coast where some of the world's most valuable fish resources are capable of yielding great economic and social benefits, many commercial fishers and fishing companies are near bankruptcy and sport fishers and Indians are preoccupied with declining opportunities to fish.

On the East Coast, the fishery does not provide a good living for many of the people who are involved in it. It can be said that whether you are a fisherperson with a boat of your own, a crew member on someone else's vessel, a worker in a processing plant, or a shareholder in a large fishing company, you are unlikely to earn a decent return on either your labour or your capital. A significant number of the families of fisherpersons have incomes near or below the poverty line for rural Canada. This should not, and need not be so.

The church cannot abandon these farm and fishing families in this their time of need for understanding and compassion. The church must, in the first instance, acquaint itself with the changes which are taking place in society, and then assist these families in understanding these changes. But we cannot stop there. We must fully support the agricultural and fishing communities in their efforts to obtain from federal and provincial governments a just return for their efforts in feeding their fellow Canadians....

A National Food and Nutrition Policy

The Committee has continued its study of the basic objectives which should be contained in any national food and nutrition policy. These objectives are as follows:

- a. an adequate and stable financial return to the basic food producer;
- b. an adequate and dependable supply of nutritious foods at a reasonable prices for all Canadians;

- c. a continuous supply of food to assist in meeting world food needs, including emergency food aid on a temporary basis;
- d. the development of nutritional information and an educational program to bring such information to all Canadians;
- e. support for research and the development of new technology, as well as for extension services to make the results available to all food producers. ..

Food Production in the Wholeness of Creation

Resolution No. 79

God created a magnificent wholeness, a glorious diversity of interacting life beyond human power to comprehend or duplicate. People were charged with the care of the natural world and of each other. Within this covenant, people were given a special responsibility for animals.

Since the beginning, men and women have sown and reaped, cast and pulled their nets, seeking food. Human ingenuity has enhanced nature's processes, resulting in an amazing abundance of food, but often inflicting violence on nature and people.

If we wish to fulfil the covenant, we must ensure that advances in biotechnology respect the integrity of creation, and that such advances do not give power to the few at the expense of the many. For this reason, the Committee opposes plant breeders' rights legislation which would give control over plant-germ plasm to private enterprises, and hence tend toward diminishing non-commercial and native varieties.

The Committee does not oppose biotechnology, but asks that it serve and nurture the covenantal relationship between people and nature. For example, the Committee would support the breeding of domestic animals to adapt to specific climates or habitats, but would oppose experimentation that disregards the comfort and well-being of the animal produced, reducing the animal to a food-producing machine.

The Committee laments the breakdown of mutually beneficial interdependence of city and farm. City and farm must live together on the basis of fairness and equality, and parity. The prices paid to food producers have fallen so low that thousands have left our farms and our fishing villages to seek their livelihood elsewhere. When those who work our land and fish our seas are forced to leave their work, the relationship of all of us to the natural world is made more fragile. Once again, the covenant is broken—people are put against people, people are alienated from nature.

Soil Degradation

Resolution No. 80

The Agriculture and Food Resources Committee feels that as Christians we must continue to speak to the issue of land use and abuse and that the church must provide guidance in this important area, because we believe that God created the land and made us to be stewards of it.

Between 1961 and 1976, 3.5 million acres of farmland, the equivalent of the size of Prince Edward Island, we lost to non-agricultural uses. The loss of prime, arable land to non-farm use is an issue of ongoing social, economic and moral urgency that requires immediate attention. But perhaps even more serious is the degradation of the soil which is occurring in all parts of Canada. Included in the factors causing this degradation are erosion by water, by wind and loss of soil organic matter as well as soil salinization and acidification, soil contamination, soil compaction and soil disturbance, all of which result in loss of soil fertility.

Soil degradation is already costing Canadian farmers \$1 billion a year in farm income. A loss which they can ill afford to lose. Much of the problem lies with the great pressure being placed on our agricultural sector. Canadian farmers have been asked to demand the last ounce of productivity from our soils—largely because of economic necessity.

Economics of Farming and Fishing

Resolution No. 81

Many farming and fishing families in Canada are hurting. Statistics show that at least one-third of these family operations are in financial difficulties. In Ontario, average net on-farm income in 1983 was \$2,389. Also in 1983, Saskatchewan farmers' net income declined by 24 per cent over the previous year, while a major supermarket chain accumulated a \$53 million profit, up 16 per cent over 1982. The financial shake-up of the '80s is eliminating farm families by the thousands.

Similarly, the Canadian fishing industry is mired in financial crisis, plagued by internal bickering, beset with uncertainty about the future, and divided on how to solve its problems.

Our church has always recognized the importance of the family food production unit. Justice demands that farmers and fishers receive adequate prices for their commodities. Of \$1,660 per capita spent each year on food in Canada, only \$112 goes to food producers. The Agriculture and Food Resources Committee supports efforts to establish farmers and fishers in structures to achieve adequate prices.

The Committee also supports the forging of trade arrangements that maximize food self-sufficiency for Canada, and oppose all arrangements that diminish it. Our farmers and fishers should be protected from the influence of United States' and other countries' unfair pricing practices.

Pastoral Care

Resolution Nos. 82 and 83

The Agriculture and Food Resources Committee focuses primarily on the more tangible aspects of farming and fishing such as structures and models of production and marketing. However, the Committee is intensely aware that our endeavours to work for justice and right relationships between ourselves and creation, between neighbour and neighbour, does not always result in the correct word being said to a family in crisis in the farming and fishing sector. Because of this concern, the Committee is submitting two resolutions to the General Council in an attempt to improve relations and understanding between urban and rural people.

Native Indian Fishing Rights

Resolution No. 84

For some time, the Agriculture and Food Resources Committee has been aware of and concerned about the lack of policy regarding native Indian fishing rights. Now that we have a native Indian fishing person from the West Coast on our Committee, this concern has been enhanced.

The Indian fishery puts relatively light demands on the fish resources in the Pacific region, but it resolves issues of profound social, political, economic and nutritional consequences. A major impediment to the development of a satisfactory policy for Indian fisheries has been the lack of public understanding of Indians' traditional reliance on fish; the cultural and economic significance they attach to these resources.

The Agriculture and Food Resources Committee is of the opinion that Indian claims on fish should be made explicit, binding and unequivocal, so that they can be provided for in the context of modern social and economic conditions. To accomplish this, defined quantities of fish must be allocated to Indian fisheries. This will secure the Indians' claim on the available catch and eliminate the legal uncertainty that now surrounds the question.

Food Production in the Wholeness of Creation

Resolution No. 79

WHEREAS the United Church supports public research and development the area of agriculture and food production, and the adequate funding of same, provided such research is socially beneficial and in particular does not have destabilizing effects on the farming and fishing communities:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 31st General Council requests the General Secretary of General Council to request the federal and provincial governments to ensure that in all animal experimentation studies related to Food Production, the animals are not subjected to unnecessary stress or abuse; and further, that in the pursuit of higher production, the physical or emotional characteristics of the animals are not distorted or altered so as to cause them to live under undue distress.

Soil Degradation

Resolution No. 80

WHEREAS the church must be concerned about the long-term production capability of our soil, we add our voice to those who are asking for action on this matter:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 31st General Council requests the General Secretary of General Council to invite the federal, provincial and territorial governments to develop comprehensive soil conservation policies which include financial incentives to farmers to help defray the cost of such conservation practices.

Economics of Farming and Fisheries

Resolution No. 81

WHEREAS the Committee is of the opinion that free trade with the United States in agriculture and fish products would not bring an overall net benefit to Canadian food producers and Canadian society:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 31st General Council requests the General Secretary of the General Council to inform the government of Canada that The United Church of Canada is opposed to a general free trade agreement with the United States, preferring a sector-by—sector approach for agriculture and fisheries. This would preserve existing trade arrangements and at the same time provide opportunities for expanded markets.

Pastoral Care

Resolution No. 82

WHEREAS the Agriculture and Food Resources Committee is concerned that many urban people in Canada do not fully understand the problems facing agricultural and fishing families, or the contribution which these families are making to society as a whole:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the General Council encourage The United Church Observer to continue to include articles that foster a better urban-rural understanding.

Pastoral Care

Resolution No. 83

WHEREAS not all ministers serving in rural charges may have the necessary background and knowledge to be of optimum assistance to their parishioners:

That those being settled for the first time in areas where farming and fishing are prevalent be required to take a two-week course in rural ministry;

That particular educational centres be asked to develop a training program (perhaps using short-term NCD/RD (VIM) training grants);

That Continuing Education funds be used to assist in financing;

That the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education in consultation with the Agriculture and Food Resources Committee of General Council and with the Division of Mission in Canada, be asked to give favourable considerations to developing an experimental program for this purpose.

That this be referred to MP and E for favourable consideration.

Native Indian Fishing Rights

Resolution No. 84

WHEREAS the Agriculture and Food Resources Committee supports the native Indian claims to fishing rights; and

WHEREAS it makes more sense to enhance the ability of Indian people to support themselves through the fishing industry, rather than force them on to social assistance:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 31st General Council requests the General Secretary of General Council to request the federal, and where appropriate, the

provincial governments to clarify, strengthen and guarantee Indian fishery rights in full consultation with the Indian people; this to include Licensing Principles and Licensing Boards.

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