

Prologue

1. We are witnessing profound and disturbing changes in rural America. Land ownership is being restructured, agricultural production is becoming more heavily industrialized and concentrated in fewer hands¹ and the earth all too frequently is being subjected to harmful farming, mining and development practices. Such changes are adversely affecting our rural people, their way of life, their land and the wider national and international communities which depend on them to satisfy their hunger.

2. A generation ago, we could see throughout the region innumerable owner-operated family farms, stable and thriving communities, seemingly limitless prime soil and extensive areas of natural beauty. But this picture has changed. On much of the rural landscape now we see deserted and dilapidated farm buildings, dying communities, eroding soil, urban sprawl, and mining scars.

3. We are concerned about this transformation on the land in America's most productive agricultural region. We have seen people leave the land, churches and schools emptied, and communities condemned to decay. We must ask: Why is this happening?; and: What might be done about it?

4. We have searched our religious heritage to see how members of the Judaeo-Christian community have responded to similar situations in previous eras. Their voices speak to us from ages past; we seek to utilize their insights in our present historical moment. Of particular importance for us are their perspectives on the traditional Judaeo-Christian concept of stewardship of the land and its resources.

5. Our reflections on our situation and our tradition have led us to speak out, not only for ourselves but also and especially for those who have no voice, for those who have suffered most from changes in the rural scene: family farmers, farmworkers, Native Americans and the world's hungry. We have heard their cries of anger and pain. We have