

Since 1946, I have been serving as the pastor of rural and small-town churches located in the heart of the Farm Belt. I have seen a drastic change take place in our whole farm economy. Twenty-two years ago it was possible for a man to farm 40 acres and supply the needs for himself and three others in the family. I remember in my first parish three such farmers. Of course, they did not have all of the modernization that is now part of the farming picture, but they were able to maintain themselves and pay off the mortgage. In those days, a farm of 200 acres was considered large and would have required at least one hired man.

In contrast, today we see the average family farm in the 500- to 600-acre size and many are saying that it will be necessary in the near future for the small farmer to go to 1,000 acres to survive. I really have no objection to the family farm being enlarged. In the increased mechanization of the present day, it could well be possible for the individual farmer to manage in an efficient manner the increased size of farm.

What does concern me is the continued growth of the commercial or corporate farming organizations. Although my field is theology and social ethics, it does not take a trained agricultural economist to understand the reasons for the rapid rise in the number of commercial farming enterprises.

The cost-price squeeze has been taking its toll of small farmers at an ever-increasing pace. Only the most efficient, no matter how large his operation, has been able to survive. He has done this through the use of scientific and technical tools that were unknown a generation ago. But as he has done this technically correct procedure and increased his productive know-how, he has learned that his increase has not been of financial benefit to him. Instead, it was eaten up by higher production and machinery costs.

The farmer has many occupational advantages that make it an appealing vocation. He is becoming more and more aware, however, that there are many other occupational opportunities that will allow him to have many of the advantages of farm life with a much higher rate of return for time expended. It is quite understandable why the exodus from the farm has become so rapid.

For the farmer who chooses to stay, the obstacles become formidable. The demands for more machinery and larger acreages march down the agricultural road together. Only the fortunate few are able to underwrite the financial requirements of this expanding operation. As more and more individual farmers drop by the wayside, the slack is picked up by the commercial enterprises who are looking for investment projects.

I live in a community of 2,000 persons and a county with a population of 8,000. Imagine if you will, the impact this trend toward commercialization is having upon our economy. First of all we are losing our population to the urban areas as they leave the farms. This has reduced the economic growth factor throughout the county. As the service area is reduced, so the need for servicing units have declined and we lose more population to the urban centers. At the same time, the commercial investors are gaining a stronger hold on the farm economy. It takes no imagination to see that absentee investors have no