

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
RESOLUTION ON THE TOBACCO FARM CRISIS IN KENTUCKY
Program Unit on Rural Life Issues
Approved by the Annual Assembly, October 23 -24, 1997

BACKGROUND

Increasing public and political pressures to reduce and possibly ban the production and sale of tobacco products are causing difficult issues to arise for many in our Commonwealth, but our tobacco farmers are the most vulnerable. They continue to live on the psychological and economic edge of a potentially disastrous crisis.

Although our farmers and their families are in the forefront of those affected, our churches across the state also continue to experience the impact of this complicated issue. Accumulative stress for churches and people of faith is growing, as the pressure to change or face economic ruin trickles down to local communities.

A recent survey of family farmers in the Midwest (the farm crisis continues: Pastoral Leadership in the Rural Church, by Roger T. Williams) finds that “conditions are much worse now than they were during the farm crisis of the 1980’s. The reason for this can be found in the concept of ‘cumulative stress’”.

Kentucky’s tobacco farmers, largely sheltered from the 80’s crisis in the Midwest by the crop that is now under attack, can certainly qualify for “cumulative stress” in the 1990’s.

Given the reality of the crisis, the Kentucky Council of Churches’ Program Unit on Rural Life Issues encourages churches and all people of faith to recognize the complicated nature of the problem, and to act prayerfully to respond to the needs generated by the crisis. We are called by God “to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with God” (Micah 6:8). We also affirm God’s message to us to remain faithful, hopeful, and loving (I Corinthians 13:13).

FACETS OF THE CRISIS

After much prayer, study and consideration the Program Unit on Rural Life Issues identifies the following interrelated facets of the crisis:

1. A way of life in Kentucky is passing away, yet few tobacco farmers would deny that a problem exists.
2. Some church members are unaware of the problem and fail to see how a Tobacco Farm Crisis will impact their community and church.
3. Although attitudes about alternative or supplemental crops are improving some farmers continue to be ambivalent about such crops, and don’t believe that alternative crops can provide viable sources of income. They continue to look for a single alternative crop to tobacco, rather than diversification with multiple crops.
4. There seems to be no safe place for farmers and other community members to discuss their fears and anxieties, and to strategize together about solutions.
5. Increasing numbers of farmers are expressing guilt regarding tobacco production and see themselves being portrayed in the public eye as perpetrators of evil.
6. Despite the growing need there is a demonstrated lack of economic research and marketing support for growing and marketing alternative and/or supplemental crops.
7. Organized efforts in Kentucky which support family farm advocacy, especially by people of faith, continue to be minimal.
8. The ethical dilemmas around the production, sale and use of tobacco are immense and need to be clarified within the framework of the church’s faith.

9. Because of the crisis, a critical negative impact on tenant farmers and seasonal laborers is already a reality.

PROPOSED KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES RESOLUTION

Therefore, in light of the critical nature of the Tobacco Farm Crisis in Kentucky, we, the delegates to the 50th Annual Assembly of the Kentucky Council of Churches, representing the eleven member communions and the individual congregations holding membership in the Council, resolve to be supportive of Kentucky farmers in the following ways:

1. We will avoid blaming the tobacco farmers who are, in many ways, victims of the changes that occurred in medical science and shifting public attitudes and policies.
2. We especially encourage rural churches to develop a new vision for their community, a vision in which the community is sustainable, socially responsible and affirms the important role of family farming.
3. We encourage churches to serve in the role of catalysts to promote safe sharing, discussion, and visioning for the future of their communities and family farming, in the midst of difficult times.
4. We urge pastors to hear and share the pain of farmers in pastoral visits to the families in their homes. While encouraging discussion of the ethical dilemmas surrounding tobacco, we would discourage confrontation from the pulpit.
5. We believe that churches must increase their assistance to local social service agencies in serving the increasing basic daily needs of rural families in crisis.
6. We recommend that churches assist in educating community members about why people have historically grown tobacco and in developing sympathetic ways of dealing realistically with the crisis.
7. We believe that rural people particularly need to hear and see a spoken and lived gospel of hope.
8. We recommend that people of faith become advocates for research and support for alternative and supplemental crops to tobacco.
9. Churches, both rural and urban, are encouraged to provide marketing opportunities for locally grown produce. This could include farmer's markets in church parking lots and the promotion of "community supported agriculture."
10. We encourage all churches, rural and urban, to celebrate the gifts of farmers and God's creation in workshop and other events in the life of the church community.
11. We believe that people of faith, both in urban and rural areas, must join together to dialogue about critical agricultural and land use issues that affect all citizens of the commonwealth.
12. We encourage all people of faith, but especially people living in urban areas, to become better educated about the Tobacco Farm Crisis.
13. We call upon all people of faith to be in prayer about the crisis, both corporately and individually, in order that we can discern God's will in this unsettling time.

Resources:

Conflict Resolution Packet from the Program Unit on Peacemaking/Racism
"The Tobacco Church" and "The Tobacco Church II" edited by Ben Poage

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
RESOLUTION ON THE TOBACCO FARM CRISIS IN KENTUCKY
Program Unit on Rural Life Issues
Adopted by the 47th Annual Assembly, October 20 - 21, 1994
Amended by the Executive Board, November 29, 1994

BACKGROUND

1994 brought Kentucky farmers a step closer to a disastrous crisis. The crisis threatens to have serious and far-reaching economic, social, political, cultural, and religious effects. The "Tobacco Farm Crisis", precipitated by strong public and political pressure to reduce, and possibly ban, the production and sale of tobacco products, is causing difficult issues to arise for all citizens of the Commonwealth.

Although farmers and their families are in the forefront of those affected, our churches across the state are already experiencing the impact of this complicated issue. There is every reason to believe that the near future holds more stress for churches and people of faith, as the pressures to change trickles down to local communities already under much economic and social stress.

A recent report issued by the Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center, "The Future of Burley Tobacco: Likely Outcomes, Points of Leverage and Policy Recommendations", by Michael T. Childress, paints a dark picture of what may happen to Kentucky's economy if tobacco quotas fall 40% in the next decade. Childress predicts that "Kentucky stands to lose income equivalent to the loss of 18,000 jobs," and he further foresees that Eastern and South-Central Kentucky (already depressed rural areas) will be the hardest hit. Although these figures are serious enough, the picture will be even bleaker if tobacco is banned completely.

Given the reality of the crisis, the Kentucky Council of Churches' Program Unit on Rural Life Issues encourages churches and all people of faith to recognize the complicated nature of the problem, and to act prayerfully to respond to the needs generated by the crisis. We are called by God "to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with God" (Micah 6:8). We also affirm God's message to us to remain faithful, hopeful, and loving. (I Corinthians 13:13)

THE NATURE OF THE CRISIS

After much prayer, study, and consideration, the Program Unit on Rural Life Issues identifies the following interrelated facets of the crisis:

1. A way of life in Kentucky is passing away, yet some tobacco farmers deny that a major problem is emerging which threatens Kentucky farmers and rural communities.
2. Some church members also are not aware that a problem exists and fail to see how the Tobacco Farm Crisis will impact their community and church.
3. Some farmers are ambivalent about alternative crops, and feel hopeless that alternative crops can provide viable sources of income. They seem to be looking for a singular alternative crop to tobacco, rather than diversification.
4. There seems to be no safe place for farmers and other community members to discuss their fears and anxieties, and to strategize together about solutions.
5. Many farmers are expressing guilt regarding tobacco production and believe that they are being portrayed in the public eye as perpetrators of evil.
6. There is a demonstrated lack of economic and research support for growing and marketing alternative crops
7. There are few organized efforts across the state to support family farm advocacy, especially by people of faith.

8. The ethical dilemmas around the production, sale, and use of tobacco are immense and need to be clarified within the framework of the church's faith.
9. A critical negative impact on tenant farmers and seasonal laborers is expected because of the crisis.

RESOLUTION

THEREFORE, in light of the critical nature of the Tobacco Farm Crisis in Kentucky, we, the delegates to the 47th Annual Assembly of the Kentucky Council of Churches, representing the eleven member communions and the individual congregations holding membership in the Council, resolve to be supportive of Kentucky farmers in the following ways:

1. We will avoid blaming the tobacco farmers, who are, in many ways, victims of the changes that have occurred in medical science and shifting public attitudes and policies. Farmers have been urged and supported by agricultural groups in Kentucky to grow only tobacco. Blaming is not a behavior which will help the farmers make the necessary changes.
2. We encourage rural churches especially to develop a new vision for their community, a vision in which the community is sustainable, inclusive, and utilizes the special strengths of family farmers.
3. We encourage churches to serve as catalysts for safe sharing, discussion, and visioning for the future of their communities and family farming, in the midst of difficult times.
4. We urge pastors to reach out to hear and share the pain of farmers in pastoral visits to the families in their homes. While encouraging discussion of the ethical dilemmas surrounding tobacco, we would discourage confrontation from the pulpit.
5. We believe that churches must begin to assist local social service agencies in serving the increasing basic daily needs of rural families.
6. We recommend that churches assist in educating community members about why people have chosen to grow tobacco, and in developing methods to deal realistically with the crisis.
7. We believe that rural people particularly need to hear and see a spoken and lived gospel of hope.
8. We recommend that people of faith become advocates for research and support for alternative crops to tobacco.
9. Churches, both rural and urban, are encouraged to provide marketing opportunities for locally grown produce. This could include farmer's markets in church parking lots, or promoting "community supported agriculture."
10. We encourage all churches to celebrate the gifts of farms and God's creation in worship and other events in the life of the church community.
11. We believe that people of faith, both in urban and rural areas, must join together to dialogue about critical agricultural issues and land use issues that affect us all.
12. We encourage all people of faith, but especially people living in urban areas, to become better educated about the Tobacco Farm Crisis.
13. We call upon all people of faith to be in prayer about the crisis, both corporately and individually, in order that we can discern God's will in this unsettling time.

Resources:

Conflict Resolution Packet from the Program Unit on Peacemaking/Racism
"Tobacco Church", Ben Poage