

What Does 2003 Hold for Rural America?

Those short-sighted people prospering from the abuse of our rural places and peoples are not listening. And they have the ears of our governments.

Young men and women from the rural South, Baptist young folk, will be much more highly represented in terms of percentages, if not real numbers, than any other segment of the American population. Death, the break-up of fragile families, drug addiction, mental breakdowns, broken bodies. These will be the human cost of victory.

Among those who come home will be many who are wounded in body and spirit. They will live out their lives hurting, hostile and disabled. They will further impoverish the poorer places of our land. War is hell. And the body count does not begin to tell the story of its true costs.

Several thousand more rural churches will close. Country churches are an endangered species. This will be a sad experience for many members and friends. From a distance one can be “philosophical” and conclude that this is just a consequence of shifting patterns of community life. But this does not relieve the hurt when it is “my” church. Deep memories are in that place. God and humankind have done business there.

Since the 1920s, federal policy has been to move people off the farm and into industrial jobs in our cities. Rural communities and towns have dried up as a consequence. For many, the last institution to close has been the church. Many of us see this as wasteful today, because telecommunications diminishes the need to draw people to urban living. But the lobby of the land developers and home builders is strong. Perhaps it is time for a federal policy that seeks to repopulate rural America.

In 2003 American agriculture will operate under a new “farm bill” that is really very much like the pre-1995 one. It re-introduces subsidies based on production of food and fiber. So, those who produce the most get the most. This is a prescription for the future consolidation of food production in the hands of a few corporations.

For more than a decade rural America has experienced a loss of jobs in manufacturing. NAFTA only sped up the process. Textiles have left the Baptist Zion of the Southeast. Certainly, these were hard and dangerous jobs. One ought not to aspire to become an operative in a sewing factory. But, they were jobs. They put food on the table. They paid the bills.

In 2003 we will see more and more Americans in rural communities going on disability. The mandatory cut-offs of welfare reform have become a reality. With no jobs available and no more eligibility for welfare payments, the rural poor are seeking to be declared disabled and no longer able to hold gainful employment. Spiritually, psychologically, socially and economically, this is not good.

More prisons and toxic trash dumps will open across rural America this year. Here are our growth industries. They are needed. But they have grave social and environmental costs.

Agriculture has always been alive with risks. Drought, flood, price instability, insects and diseases are often a part of the picture. Friends from Australia, Africa and the northern Great Plains are caught in the grip of continuing drought. While “man cannot live by bread alone,” we do need food. This need cannot be left to the vicissitudes of a “free market.” This is particularly true when food processing and distribution is pretty much controlled by a handful of global corporations. Again, our nation and world need a comprehensive rural policy.

I make Jeremiah sound like an optimist. Sorry, but I feel that sensitive Christians need to hear from those who are suffering. For nearly four decades I have monitored the abuse of rural America. I do not see things getting better. I see no silver linings.

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Many of us in rural America are driven back to asking God for a miracle. We would like to think that the nation ought to develop a vision for the future of rural America. But we do not see this happening. Those short-sighted people prospering from the abuse of our places and peoples are not listening. And they have the ears of our governments.

But God is just. Things will be different one day. There is a life beyond this one.

This is our anchor. This is our hope.

[Gary Farley](#) is partner in the Center for Rural Church leadership, Carrollton, Ala.