

Human development campaign puts priority on farm crisis

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — Farm-related projects have become a major target of funding by the Campaign for Human Development, the agency the U.S. bishops started 15 years ago to fight poverty by helping people help themselves.

Before this year's farm crisis, only an occasional agricultural project got help from the CHD national fund, said Bishop William Friend of Alexandria-Shreveport, La., head of the CHD committee.

But more than \$1 million of the \$7 million CHD allocated in the past year has gone to farm-related projects, he said. More than 30 farm projects, from Maine to Texas, from Alabama to California, got CHD aid.

The Campaign for Human Development is funded by a national collection taken in most parishes the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

Bishop Friend and Archbishop Roger Mahony of Los Angeles were interviewed in Washington Nov. 15 during the annual fall meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, which had just issued a message to Congress and President Reagan asking for both emergency and long-term legislation to help save owner-operated, middle-sized farms.

The two prelates said they wanted people to know that the Catholic bishops are doing something for farmers as well as talking about the issue.

Bishop Friend said that on Nov. 10, just before the NCCB meeting, his CHD committee approved a grant of \$75,000 to a model small-farm co-op in the Diocese of Stockton, Cal., which Archbishop Mahony helped organize when he was bishop there.

The co-op, Archbishop Mahony said, now helps about 100 small farmers to keep and develop their farms instead of being forced out of business by large corporate farms.

Archbishop Mahony said the bishops are deeply concerned about the farm crisis because the United States is on the path of an "ominous, dangerous trend in food production." The food producers, he said, increasingly are corporations or absentee owners whose sole interest in the land is as a financial investment.

"Take Tenneco, for example," he said. "It owns 1 million acres of farm land, yet that makes up only 3 percent of the whole corporation."

The Stockton co-op, he said, helps small farmers stay in business by showing them new skills and discovering new crops for them to grow. It got started by tapping into

the produce needs of San Francisco's large restaurant industry.

"We asked chefs what vegetables they wanted that they couldn't get. One chef named off 30 vegetables nobody (among the farmers) had ever heard of," he said.

A major factor in the co-op's success, the archbishop added, is that the co-op itself takes care of getting the produce from the farms to the restaurants, eliminating the middle man who usually takes a large share of the profit from farm produce.

The co-op also tries to "enable new people to get into farming for the first time," he said. Many who are recent arrivals from Southeast Asia or Mexico come from agricultural families but do not have the means to

start farming on their own, he added.

To keep its innovative, experimental edge, the co-op runs a demonstration farm where new crops and new techniques of organic farming are tested, Archbishop Mahony added. Immigrants from Southeast Asia, where few chemical herbicides or pesticides are used, have contributed valuable knowledge for organic farming, he said.

Weather, soil, water, marketing and other conditions in the Midwest or South or Northeast may differ from those in the area of the Stockton co-op, but "the basic concept is one that can be brought to bear anywhere," Archbishop Mahony said.

Bishop Friend said the experimental aspect of the Stockton co-op was one of the things

that appealed to CHD: "We've been largely 're-active,'" he said. "We'd like to be 'pro-active,'" or creating change rather than responding to it.

Another shift in CHD emphasis, Bishop Friend said, is an effort to be more "inter-active." CHD is looking more for joint ventures with dioceses or other groups that will match CHD funding with their own to increase the leverage and effectiveness of each CHD dollar, he said.

That was the case with the Stockton co-op project, where the Diocese of Stockton committed itself to matching funds, said Father Alfred LoPinto, CHD executive director.

Some farmers say churches not helping in crisis

Kansas City, Mo. (NC) — Forty-four percent of Missouri farmers surveyed feel that churches are not responsive to their needs, according to a study conducted by two rural sociologists from the University of Missouri at Columbia.

The sociologists, William and Judith Heffernan, reported findings of their research Nov. 7 during a conference in Kansas City on rural health problems.

The Heffernans' study said 44 percent of Missouri farmers from the 40 families surveyed feel their churches are not responding to a multitude of problems caused by the farm crisis, including loss of self-esteem, depression, alcoholism and family violence.

The Heffernans' findings are "probably valid," Sister Stephanie Mertens, director of social concerns for the Diocese of Jefferson City, Mo., told The Catholic Key, newspaper of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph.

"But we need to also say that it is a two-way street. Often the farmers have told concerned pastors to stay out of farm problems," said Sister Mertens, a member of the Sisters of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ who works closely with farm groups to save family farms.

In a separate interview with The Catholic Missourian, newspaper of the Jefferson City Diocese, Sister Mertens said that since the Heffernans conducted their survey in 1984, churches in Missouri have "greatly increased" their response to the farm crisis by offering material and financial support and sponsoring seminars, workshops and prayer meetings.

She added, however, that the families

surveyed had already lost their farms and "are not part of the current group of farmers in Missouri dealing with the financial and emotional crisis."

"There is a broadening awareness of the farm crisis among farmers themselves, urban dwellers and churches all across the state," she said. "I think the Heffernans did everyone a favor, including the churches, because it heightened everyone's awareness of the problem."

She added that the four Catholic dioceses in Missouri have contributed \$15,500 to the Farm Alliance of Rural Missouri.

The farm crisis is causing many "health-related problems," said Nancy Barr, a registered nurse who heads the Diocesan Catholic Health Association for the Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese.

"The high level of stress that accompanies economic problems and difficulties creates many other problems within the family and community," she said in an interview.

The Heffernans' study also said farmers often will not seek counseling from a county mental health facility because "of the stigma" of going there. One solution may be to establish mobile facilities that go to the farmers, the study said.

Many farmers cannot afford health insurance, according to Missouri Gov. John Ashcroft, a conference speaker.

Ashcroft said some farm families, for example, are neglecting pre-natal care and children could be born with long-term health problems. Nutrition is another factor, he added, because many Missouri farmers and others in the Midwest "are going hungry."

Bishops make statement of concern on farms

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — In a last-minute change, the U.S. bishops added a statement of concern for farmers to the agenda of their Nov. 11-15 meeting in Washington.

Archbishop Ignatius Strecker of Kansas City, Kan., took the floor as the meeting opened Nov. 11 to ask the addition to the agenda in the name of himself and "50 bishops who met last evening."

They wanted "a message of concern on our part to the many people who are hurting" in the area of food and agriculture, he said.

He promised to have a draft statement in

the bishops' hands by that afternoon for an initial presentation.

The bishops agreed unanimously to the agenda addition.

Room would have to be made later during the five-day meeting for amendment, debate and voting on the statement.

A number of the nation's Catholic bishops, especially from the Midwestern farm states, have strongly urged legislation to alleviate the current farm crisis, caused in large part by heavy investment debts and rising operating costs which have not been compensated by a corresponding rise in food prices or farm income.

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