

“Every family on their own”?: Iowa’s Mennonite Farm Communities and the 1980s Farm Crisis

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On June 7, 1984, Gerald and Kathy Yoder’s farm was destroyed during the largest and most destructive outbreak of tornados to hit southeast Iowa in recorded history. According to Charles H. Myers of the National Weather Service Forecast Office, the tornados caused seventy-five to two hundred million dollars’ worth of damage, ninety-three injuries, and four deaths.¹ Within twenty-four hours, members of the Yoders’ East Union Mennonite congregation, and many of their non-Mennonites neighbours, turned out to clean up the property and gather 300 head of cattle that were roaming the fields.² The tornado hit southeast Iowa at a most inauspicious time. Across the state, farmers were suffering the effects of the largest farm crisis since the Great Depression. Though only a boy, Brent Yoder recalls the early 1980s as a particularly stressful time for his family and his congregation since it felt like farmers were on their own.³ This article traces the changing attitudes among Mennonite farmers from viewing agriculture as a community-oriented vocation at mid-century to viewing it strictly

as a private enterprise by the 1980s. It argues that during the 1980s, rural Mennonites practiced local mutual aid during specific moments of public crisis but congregations and conferences were at a loss when it came to mitigating the adverse effects of private financial disasters.

During the second half of the twentieth century, many of Iowa's Mennonite farmers embraced the technological efficiencies of America's "Green Revolution" and professionalized their operations along commercial and scientific lines. As a result – and in contrast to their Amish neighbours' small-scale operations – these "conventional" Mennonite farmers needed access to large amounts of acreage and capital. The situation also made them sensitive to changes in the global economic environment and placed them in direct competition with their neighbours, who were now their competitors, for buying and renting land. As a result, land was no longer the place where community "happened" during busy times, such as planting and harvesting. Instead, a single farmer could easily manage hundreds of acres of land using modern mechanical and chemical technologies. Simultaneously, many of Iowa's Mennonite farmers embraced the idea that North America's Christian farmers were called to "feed the world" through their expanded output. Growing suburban and urban Mennonite populations likewise directed aid outside their local communities through a range of domestic and overseas missions and charities. I argue that these shifts represent an ironic trend among America's Mennonite farmers (and by extension, the broader Mennonite Church) away from communal expressions of farming and faith and toward an emphasis on individual choice and global impact.

Mennonites have a long history in Iowa. The first Mennonites arrived on its eastern edges in 1839, seven years before it became a state.⁴ Churches descending from both the (old) Mennonite Church (OM) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) are represented here. In fact, the GC was founded in Lee County, Iowa in 1859–1860 by a group of Mennonite immigrants from the Palatinate region of Europe.⁵ Iowa's OM congregations largely migrated to Iowa from Maryland and Ohio and came out of an Amish background. In the 1840s and 1850s, they settled in Iowa, Johnson, and Washington counties.⁶ Unlike Mennonites from Russia who attempted to reproduce their compact settlements in Nebraska, Kansas, and central Canada in the 1870s, Iowa's Amish and Mennonite farmers embraced the logic of the American land survey system and the efficiencies of isolated farmsteads. Nevertheless,

they maintained close kinship networks and generally avoided participating in "worldly" society.

In the late nineteenth century, the Amish who settled in the tri-county area started moving along the "liberalizing" spectrum from Amish, to Amish Mennonite, to OM.⁷ For the Upper and Lower Deer Creek churches, this shift was instigated by the practical issue of building church buildings (rather than meeting in homes) but it gave way to changes that affected congregants' theological, political, and economic mindsets. In the 1920s, Iowa's Mennonites confronted the theological polarities of "fundamentalism" and "liberal theology" and new initiatives for pan-Mennonite unity made possible by the formation of the transnational aid organization, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). On a regional level, members of the East Union, West Union, Lower Deer Creek, Liberty, and Daytonville (Wellman) churches, were founding members of the Iowa Nebraska Mennonite Conference in 1920. The conference included nearly twenty churches clustered mostly in southeastern Nebraska and southeastern Iowa.⁸ These developments caused Iowa's Mennonite population to accept newer and more political ways of thinking about church doctrine and newer and more ecumenical ways of thinking about church organization, each of which transcended their local communities.⁹

Iowa's Mennonites were likewise swept up in broader processes affecting American agriculture, business, and the environment during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Between 1929 and 1932, gross income on American farms plummeted from \$13.8 to \$6.5 billion; average prices for wheat declined from \$1.03 to 38 cents per bushel; corn fell from 80 to 32 cents per bushel; and hogs dropped from \$12.93 to \$6.13 per hundredweight.¹⁰ While some Mennonite farm communities were relatively unscathed by the Depression, others found themselves at the mercy of banks and the environment. For example, Iowa churches in the Iowa-Nebraska conference were less affected by droughts during the 1930s than their Nebraskan brethren. Nebraska farmers saw their topsoil blow away in dust storms and what was left of their farms sold at public auctions. According to Mennonite historian Paul Toews, in 1932 alone, 136 farms foreclosed in Nebraska's thirteen southeastern counties, which was the center of the state's Mennonite population. Though co-religionists usually bought Mennonite farms, individuals who lost their land suffered the hardships of coping with economic processes beyond their control.¹¹

Depression-era Mennonite farmers contended with the vicissitudes of a global economy by availing themselves of government

help – in the form of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Farm Commodity Administration, and the Commodity Credit Corporation – but they also relied on the material and financial support of local communities.¹² Gunny sacks of potatoes mysteriously showed up on a family's back doorstep, sewing circles produced clothes for needy neighbours, and farmers hired their brethren as farmhands.¹³ Aid extended beyond the congregational level, but it was often oriented to other Mennonites. For instance, the Iowa communities of Kalona, Manson, Wayland, and Wellman donated forty-two tons of food to needy members of the Iowa-Nebraska Conference.¹⁴ Hundreds of Nebraskan Mennonites also migrated to eastern Iowa in the 1930s to restart their lives and find work on their co-religionists' farms.¹⁵ During the Depression, the communal nature of Mennonite farming meant that church members knew which of their brethren needed aid. The limited size of their operations and the need for human farm labour also meant that the local or regional church had the resources to help them. America's Mennonite farmers remained locally oriented until mid-century, but the effects of the Great Depression indicated that their agricultural livelihoods were increasingly entwined with national and global affairs.

During the second half of the twentieth century, America's Mennonites were less inhibited from making personal decisions concerning their education, income, and occupation than in times past. They also began imagining their denomination as a node in the global Christian church and their Christian service as having a global impact. This development was partly facilitated by the movement of Mennonite young people from the country to the city after the Second World War.¹⁶ According to the United States Religious Census, in 1936, between 76.9 percent and 94.2 percent of the four largest Mennonite bodies in the United States, including the GC and MC, lived in a rural setting.¹⁷ However, by 1972, a combined American/Canadian Mennonite survey indicated that 61 percent of the GC population and 74 percent of the MC population lived rurally.¹⁸ Approximately one in five of US Mennonites moved from the countryside to urban or suburban settings in less than thirty years. The movement of rural Mennonites away from the farm mirrored their non-Mennonite neighbours. In 1940, there were 6.1 million farms in the United States and the farm population stood at 23 percent of the total population. By 1960, only 3.9 million farms remained and the farm population stood at 8.7 percent.¹⁹

Two processes accounted for this demographic shift. One was the growth of new opportunities for young Mennonites in urban areas and overseas. The other was the mechanization and rationalization of farm work. Beginning with the Second World War, Mennonite overseas agencies – such as Civilian Public Service (CPS), MCC, and the Pax Program – drew young Mennonites into the wider world where they gained experience and expertise in rural fields such as agriculture and forestry, but also in non-agricultural fields such as construction, healthcare, and management. According to Arlin Hunsberger, a Pax participant who went on to work for the Pan American Development Foundation in Haiti, the Pax program “was a powerful instrument in getting people out of their close, sometimes almost closed communities into situations that made them ponder and search for different ways of moving through life.”²⁰ After the war, the denomination’s colleges likewise experienced a dramatic increase in enrollment, which opened new doors for off-farm occupations in business, healthcare, and missions. In 1984, the Mennonite publication *Gospel Herald* reported that between 1963 and 1982, the percentage of college graduates more than tripled to 19 percent in the twenty-two major district conferences of the OM church. During this same period, the number of Mennonite men in farming fell by half to 19 percent.²¹ Noting this trend, farmer Gilbert Gingerich stated that, “in 1960 attendance at West Union was around 280 people on a given Sunday.” He continued, “Everyone was leaving for college or service or something. They were leaving the farm and going to the city.”²² By 2016, West Union’s attendance stood at about 150 people on an average Sunday.²³ Education and service were two developments that kept rural Mennonites connected to the church but simultaneously helped them break the bonds with their home communities.

Push factors also prompted young Mennonites to leave agriculture. Farmers who used tractors and combines for planting and harvesting had much less use for hired hands. Combined with the rising cost of inputs, the decreased need of farm labour meant that it was difficult for young farmers to get a start. Moreover, the ability of better-off farmers to till larger acreages crowded out smaller operations that commanded less capital and technology.²⁴ Mechanization also made farmers less dependent on local sources for their inputs and more reliant on markets beyond their control for gasoline, parts, and fertilizer. According to historian R. Douglas Hurt, farmers “climbed on the scientific and technological treadmill and then found they could not afford to get off.”²⁵ Most did not want to. New technologies pointed the way to increased profits,

less physical labour, more self-sufficiency, and elevated the occupation of farming from a lifestyle to a profession. Hurt states that “by 1960 farming had become more than a way of life; it was a business where only the most efficient survived.”²⁶

Not all college graduates and overseas volunteers left the farm for good. Some returned home energized by the new agricultural techniques and business models that they were exposed to during their time away from the farm. They were also energized by the range of activities that Mennonites participated in to make a positive impact on the world. Eleven of twenty-three Mennonite, Conservative, Beachy, and Amish respondents who held farm-related occupations stated that they had received at least some college education, including nine who had attended a Mennonite college. About half had performed service as a young person either in the United States or abroad. The knowledge and skills that farmers gained from their educations in agronomy, economics, and marketing professionalized their operations and helped them specialize and expand their production. In doing so, they took advantage of economies of scale, which kept them competitive with their neighbours.

Accompanying their professional transformation, the denomination’s conventional farmers recast their idea of what it meant to be a Christian farmer. In the early 1970s, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz famously admonished American farmers to plant from “fencerow to fencerow” and increase their profits by exporting surpluses to a hungry world.²⁷ Conventional Mennonite farmers came to see their participation in the global food economy as participation in a global Christian ministry. Gilbert Gingerich stated: “Next to being a pastor, farming is the most noble occupation” since it sustains human life.²⁸ In contrast, Old Order Amish bishop and organic farmer Vernon Yoder stated that the point of farming was to “live a simple life” in community with nature and one’s immediate neighbours. Vernon Yoder thought that the meditative aspects of a farming lifestyle are essential since he believes that “we’re supposed to work by the sweat of our brow.”²⁹ Departing from the past, and from their Amish neighbours, late twentieth century Mennonite farmers were not tilling the land simply to put food on the table or for its meditative and communal aspects. Rather, they were “feeding the world.” Speaking to this difference, historian Mark Friedberger writes, “The rapid changes that occurred in corn-belt agriculture from the fifties onward...tended to deemphasize the work ethic and to steer families away from the kind of self-absorption in farm-related tasks that so characterized

earlier decades."³⁰ Mennonite farmers' increased professionalization and education was part and parcel of a national agricultural transformation at mid-century, which globalized the way they thought about faith.

Suburban and urban Mennonites likewise viewed their participation in the general workforce and humanitarian activism as a Christian calling. Many felt called to "save the world" from nuclear war, poverty, pollution, and political oppression. In a 1981 Gospel Herald article titled "Issues facing the Mennonite Church today," the editor solicited responses to this prompt from six Mennonite leaders. Principal among them was the church's relationship to finances, its growing urbanization, and a growing consciousness of global missionary and aid work.³¹ Writing from Washington D.C., Phil M. Shenk, news editor for *Sojourners* magazine, stated that Mennonites have four options when it comes to serving the Lord in the modern world: "(a) ignore the gospels and ignore the world need; (b) read the gospels but ignore the world need; (c) read the gospels, see the world need, but explain either one way through prejudices and biases; (d) read the gospels, see the world need, and live the love of the good news."³² Shenk's logic took for granted that global needs outweighed local needs. Whereas the denomination's conventional farmers viewed the global distribution of their products as a God's work, urban and suburban Mennonites imagined their role in a global church through cash-based, social and economic initiatives, such as MCC and Mennonite Economic Development Association.³³ Regardless of their preferred methods, national and global economies were the common denominator for how urban and suburban Mennonites helped the world.

Concerns over the Mennonites' changing relationship to farming, faith, and finances were increasingly apparent during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the MCC sponsored a series of forums in Midwestern states during the early 1980s variously titled "Land, Faith, and Successful Farming" and "Faith and Agriculture Forum" that addressed what globalization and urbanization meant to the denomination. Speaking at one such event in 1981, speaker Robert Yoder of Eureka, Illinois stated "the relationship of economics to world need is tearing at us and money issues can be potentially divisive in the Mennonite Church in the 80s."³⁴ This concern was made clear during the "Faith and Farm Forum" in Washington, Illinois in 1984 when farmer Howard Landis questioned the ethics of Mennonites leaving land fallow and taking government subsidies "when 10,000 persons are dying of starvation

each day.”³⁵ America’s Mennonites felt a growing awareness that they carried the global responsibility of being wealthy Christians, regardless of their profession.

On the farm, the move toward specialization and expansion meant that land was no longer the medium where farmers, families, and members of the same congregation participated in communal labour. Rather, it was simply one input among many. At the 1980 “Land, Faith, and Successful Farming,” conference, Kenton Brubaker, horticulture professor at Eastern Mennonite College, questioned this trend by arguing that Mennonites should establish land trusts so that young people could have an easier time getting into the profession. Brubaker envisioned Mennonite-owned land as a “living system” of farming rather than a “chemical medium.”³⁶ Ed Hershberger, the former owner of Kalona’s feed mill, recalled that during the early 1950s, harvest time was a communal effort: “The neighbour boy and I were the water boys. We [would] haul water around... to the guys in the threshing machines and hauling oats and hauling bundles, that was our job.” Marge Hershberger likewise stated, “my cousin and I...we’d take lemonade out for the workers you know when they were threshing and that was fun.” According to Ed, “As long as I can remember... we always did things together with the neighbours.”³⁷ Despite Brubaker’s land trust idea and Ed and Marge’s recollections of the past, by the 1980s, most Mennonite farmers had expanded to the point where the need for mechanical labour outweighed the need for human labour. There was little else to do but keep pursuing greater economies of scale. As a Mennonite real estate agent may speak of houses as “inventory,” many farmers interviewed for this project spoke of the land as something to buy, sell, and sustain but not necessarily as a place for community.

Mennonite families also did not necessarily share the rhythms of farm life with each other since nuclear families were smaller, spouses had off-farm employment, and there was less extended family living in close proximity. Farmers Dave and Jim Yoder came from a family of eight children and they remembered a childhood of helping in the garden, collecting eggs, milking cows, throwing hay from the haymow, cleaning out the barn, and spreading lime. Yet as Jim recalled, “my older brothers, they weren’t coming back to the farm...every time one went to college, dad got some kind of new timesaving device.”³⁸ For the Yoders, the only way to keep the family farm was to use chemicals and machinery to compensate for the labour that family members used to provide. Organic farmer Calvin Yoder views this development less as the

natural order of things and more as "a test from God" to see if Mennonites could retain their communal focus. Calvin Yoder went on to state: "If it is, we've failed. And it's possible now that we don't need each other... so our Mennonite communities... don't work together like we used to."³⁹ No matter the size of a farmer's operation, or how he or she chose to farm it, most respondents considered farming to be a vocation that they chose and not a lifestyle that was expected by their families and congregations.

The farms that city-bound Mennonites grew up on in the 1940s and 1950s were therefore not the same farms that their peers transformed into agribusinesses in the 1960s and 1970s. Writing for *Gospel Herald* in 1983, author Phyllis Pellman Good lamented the Mennonites' shift from the country to the city by worrying that Mennonites were "one of the last 'tribes' to be tempted away from our communal values by the lure of professions" and that "where once a farmer could speak with authority, now a veterinarian, because of his degree, can be taken seriously on almost any subject."⁴⁰ Pellman Good, however, did not acknowledge the specialization and professionalization of Mennonite farmers. By the 1980s, an average conventional Mennonite farmer focused on a few specific crops (corn, wheat, and soybeans) or types of livestock (cattle, hogs, and chickens). Even in the twelve short years between 1971 and 1983, crop farmers in east central Iowa increased their tillable acreage from an average of 176 acres to 320.⁴¹ They often held hundreds of acres of land, tens of thousands of dollars' worth of machinery, and required access to hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of capital. According to Hurt, "Many farm enterprises now had greater capital investments than businesses in the towns and cities."⁴² Among the conventional farmers interviewed for this project, nearly all farmed at least twice as much land than their parents, if not three or four times as much. Gone were the days of a 40- or 80-acre farm, a garden, and a variety of livestock for home consumption. In its place were full-fledged agribusiness operations that were intimately tied to world markets.

America's shrinking rural Mennonite population and its growing urban Mennonite population was brought into sharp relief during the 1980s farm crisis. In the 1970s, grain and livestock farmers in the United States took up Butz's call to "get big or get out" and did their part to supply North American appetites for cheap food, new markets in China and the Soviet Union, and to compensate for food shortages in developing countries. They did so by purchasing more land and machinery, often on credit.⁴³ Generally speaking, taking on large amounts of debt is risky but it was an entirely logi-

cal move given the economic climate of the time. During the 1970s, the federal government promoted a variety of price support and supply control initiatives, which artificially inflated agricultural prices, making this sector an attractive investment. Moreover, the government used the Farmers Home Administration to loan money to farmers – usually for the purchase of land – at artificially low interest rates. Growing inflation likewise encouraged farmers to hedge against a weakening dollar by investing their cash in tangible goods and property. All of this combined to drive up land prices and farmer debt. However, since the real interest rate (the nominal rate minus inflation) was actually quite low, financing debt for investment purposes proved “unbelievably inexpensive.”⁴⁴ Farmers took advantage of this unique economic climate so that between 1969 and 1978, land values in the United States increased by 73 percent while outstanding debt grew by 59 percent.⁴⁵ Young farmers especially felt pressured to grow. According to Gerald Yoder, who had a young family at the time, “when land was \$3,000 an acre, I wanted it like everybody else.” However, he did not overleverage his operation owing to the advice of his father, which ended up saving his farm in the early 1980s.⁴⁶

Many farmers found themselves in the position of being “paper millionaires.” They could barely pay operational expenses with the cash income from their land, even as their land values rose to new heights.⁴⁷ The only option was to keep borrowing against the growing value of their collateral, which kept them competitive but placed them deeper in debt. Banks also felt pressure to keep the money flowing or risk losing their market share to competitors. Farmers’ financial security and the viability of rural banks thus relied less on farmers’ actual income and more on speculation that the artificial, but government underwritten, growth of demand and land prices would continue unabated.

By the early 1980s, the bubble burst and the farm economy took a turn for the worse. On January 4, 1980, President Carter implemented a grain embargo against the Soviet Union for instigating the Soviet-Afghan War. The decision reversed his 1976 presidential promise to farmers at the Iowa State Fair that he would end the Nixon/Ford policy of grain embargos “once and for all” since they threatened the profitability of American grain exports.⁴⁸ The global marketplace eventually sorted out the problem when Argentina, Australia, Canada, and other countries made up for the Soviet Union’s deficit and American grain was redirected to other markets.⁴⁹ Despite the embargo’s impotence, the Carter administration demonstrated that the financial security of America’s shrinking

farm population took a back seat to political expediency and broader geopolitical concerns.

Carter's embargo coincided with the Federal Reserve Board's decision to curb inflation by raising interest rates. This, in turn, strengthened the dollar and made American grain less profitable on the international market. Higher interest rates also led to higher production costs, which hurt farmers' ability to keep expanding their land holdings. The resulting decrease in land prices meant that the value of farmers' collateral spiraled downward and prompted nervous lenders to call in their loans.⁵⁰ Young farmers who were starting out and farmers who had increased their land holdings with a lot of ambition but not much equity found that they could not repay their debts. In 1982, the Department of Agriculture attempted to increase commodity prices by reducing production. In order to do so, they compensated farmers for leaving 10 percent of their land fallow. However, the policy was unproductive since it only removed marginal land from production and encouraged farmers to get more crops off of their remaining land.⁵¹ According to Gilbert Gingerich, all of this had a consequence in Iowa:

Land values...lost two-thirds of their value so there was no longer equity there to cover the loans and of course everything was deflating in value. I mean crop prices were low, livestock prices were low. You know people bought machinery and that was going down... The day there was no longer equity, that was it...And we were close to being in that position. You know, people were foreclosed. It was a sad deal.⁵²

A decade of government encouragement and easy credit was quickly reversed by a slate of unfavourable political and fiscal decisions. It was the largest farm crisis since the Great Depression.

The crisis severely affected Iowa since it is one of the country's premier agriculture states. Between 1980 and 1986, its two biggest crops, soybeans and corn, fell by 64 percent and 52 percent respectively.⁵³ Some farmers wished to sell their land to remain solvent but land prices also dropped by as much as 50 percent in the same period.⁵⁴ A few miles east of Kalona, the severity of the crisis made national news in 1985 when one of Johnson County's most successful farmers, Dale Burr, went on a killing spree that claimed his wife, a banker, and one of his tenants, after he concluded in desperation that he could no longer pay his debts.⁵⁵ Burr was not a Mennonite, but the shock of the incident reverberated through the state's rural communities.

The farm crisis was a painful time for Iowa's Mennonite population. Testifying to the desperation felt by farmers during this time, several interviewees spoke in hushed and serious voices about the crisis. A few shed tears. According to Friedberger, it was the era of the "horror story," when farmers feared visiting the bank and discussing their finances with "hatchet men," who were individuals hired by banks from outside the community to assess farmers' worth and cut off their credit.⁵⁶ Dave Yoder, who saw neighbours, friends, and even his cousin, lose their farms recalled,

going into the bank, getting a financial statement...the loan officer was kind of a new guy, brought in to fix these farmers. Either get them out or going but not let them string out and keep farming. He looked at it, and he had already hatcheted a few guys, got them to quit. He said, 'well we'll keep going another year and see what happens.' That didn't make much of an impression but I thought later that we were pretty close.

Dave and Jim had notes at the bank but they purchased their land and major equipment from their father, for "a very reasonable price."⁵⁷ Internally structured family land transfers are common among Iowa's Mennonites and are part of the reason why some farmers were able to maintain their holdings during the crisis. One interviewee, a seed dealer named Terry Erb, suggested that Mennonites were slightly better prepared than their neighbours. He reasoned that Mennonites, were "probably more reluctant" to embrace new technologies or buy land on credit.⁵⁸ Conservative Mennonite farmer Perry Miller agreed stating, "for the most part the majority of the Mennonite community would be somewhat more careful" though he conceded that he knows a lot of Catholics that are similarly cautious with their money.

According to Gilbert Gingerich, Amish and Mennonite farmers' solvency during the crisis moved along the spectrum from traditional to modern, yet no single religious or economic factor was decisive. He said that he did not know of any Amish foreclosures, but among the Beachy Amish and Conservative Mennonites, "there were some." His wife, Sandy, added that the Beachy Amish "were pretty well insulated from that."⁵⁹ For example, when questioned about the farm crisis, Beachy Amish farmer David Miller responded by asking, "What do you mean?" He went on to say that his congregation "encouraged" its members "to not extend ourselves beyond our limits."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, another Beachy farming couple, Delmar and Carolyn Bontrager saw Delmar's father get hit hard by the crisis. "After... totally paying off this 145 acres with

hogs alone in four years, [my dad] turns around and buys another farm a few years later, and then another farm, and then all of a sudden 1980 hit, and I never imagined that I would see my dad struggle like I did... Nothing was the same."⁶¹ Though expansion and monocropping were often singled out as major factors for farm failures, a myriad other factors determined the fates of individual farmers. For example, off farm employment, such as Sandy Gingerich's teaching job, provided farm families with healthcare and valuable income.⁶² Additional factors included the number and age of dependents, the financial situation of parents and relatives, the geographic location of farms, asset liquidity, interest rates, federal policies governing different types of agriculture, and national and international commodity markets. Due to the breadth of variables, when it came down to the individual farmer, the truism quoted by many of my interviewees that "timing was everything" was certainly true.

As land was no longer the medium in which Mennonites interacted with each other during the workweek, a farmer's finances were mostly detached from the life of the church. According to Mennonite sociologist J. Winfield Fretz, by the late 1970s, Mennonite congregations were "associations" rather than being "communal."⁶³ Individuals belonged to the church insofar as they gathered together a couple of times during the week. Most decisions about what happened beyond the church were left to individual conscience.

At the denominational level, Mennonite farmers came together to discuss farming and finances at an OM "Faith and Farming" conference in 1984. Participants devised a "Mennonite Statement on Farming" that discussed "a call for a return to community," an insufficient awareness "of the connection between global issues...and food costs," and the need for more "talking and listening," but admitted that "we may not be able to do very much financially" for struggling farmers.⁶⁴

On a local level, the former owner of Kalona's grain elevator, Ed Hershberger, stated: "Pastors didn't understand what [farmers] were going through," since they generally did not own farms themselves.⁶⁵ Pastors – especially those who arrived from outside the community – also did not wish to alienate congregants by being too activist oriented. According to Friedberger's survey of 135 Iowa farm families, "44 percent of respondents found their church 'not at all supportive' of their needs and only 19 percent said their church 'actively expressed support.'"⁶⁶ According to Dave Yoder, "Maybe somebody came and talked, maybe a Sunday evening or

something but not much help really.”⁶⁷ The professionalization of Mennonite farms and the Mennonite pastorate kept the church from helping its members during the farm crisis.

Farmers, for their part, did not take their financial problems to the church community since they did not want their non-farming neighbours to think that they were charity cases or assume that they could not manage their money. Friedberger’s results indicate that the mental health and spiritual needs of farmers were often neglected because “their independence and their apparently strong family structure made them less likely to seek out professionals for help.”⁶⁸ The Mennonites interviewed for this project largely accepted their changing fortunes as their personal responsibility and did not expect local Mennonite churches, or the conference as a whole, to intervene on their behalf. Beachy Amish farmers Marlin and Mary Miller said their church offered to step in and oversee their operation, but according to Mary, “We didn’t really want what they were wanting to do.”⁶⁹ After the couple paid off their bank loan, they qualified for government programs and hired an independent assessor who told them to “cut out the cancer” of their dairy operation.⁷⁰ Altogether, it was easier for most farmers to suffer in silence and avail themselves of government programs than to bring their problems to congregations that viewed the crisis as a personal/financial issue rather than a communal/religious one.

As a rule, it was impossible for farmers’ congregations and conferences to save their operations from bankruptcy. Yet there were exceptions. One instance is recorded in the minutes of the MCC’s Farm Crisis Hotline, which operated mornings and evenings, for about two years out of John and Nancy Halder’s home in Iowa City. According to their notes, a concerned individual in Kalona called the hotline to discuss the foreclosure of a farm owned by a couple who were in their seventies. The couple’s congregation, Sunnyside Conservative Mennonite Church, raised about \$36,000 to pay off their debt but Hills Bank wanted to foreclose on it because the bank thought it could make more money at a sheriff’s sale. The caller also asked what the broader Mennonite Church was doing that could help “Sunnyside...get through this fall when no doubt many more [farmers] will be facing a loss.”⁷¹ Yet a \$36,000 debt is a different order of magnitude than a \$200,000 or \$400,000 debt. When it came to large operations, church leaders agreed with Gilbert Gingerich who said that the problem was so big that “there wasn’t much of anything that could be done” and “it was pretty much every family on their own.”⁷² Writing in 1985, Ronald Kenel, moderator of the Iowa-Nebraska Conference, agreed stating,

"The church can hardly touch a \$500,000 debt."⁷³ Robert Yoder, a farmer and stewardship staff associate for the OM Board of Congregational Ministries, was likewise skeptical of the church's ability to help farmers stating that a large-scale loan program would "cause false expectations since some farmers are so deeply in debt the best 'out' is to go through the bankruptcy court."⁷⁴ In this regard, it was as impossible for the church to save a family farm operation as it was for it to save a Mennonite-owned insurance agency or car dealership.

Late-twentieth-century American Mennonites therefore had to reconceptualize themselves as a church whose members' financial problems—be they urban, suburban, or rural dwellers—were larger than it was. Unlike Old Order Amish, who are often aware of their co-religionists' financial standings and even cover medical expenses as a congregation, American Mennonites increasingly privatized areas of their lives that were not directly concerned with ministry and salvation.⁷⁵ Iowa's Mennonite farmers used to have a better sense of their neighbours' financial standing but in agri-business, according to Gilbert Gingerich, "your neighbour is you competitor. You don't talk about finances. You don't talk about yields. You don't share any information."⁷⁶ During the crisis, financial aid was neither anticipated nor assumed, since farming was not a community enterprise but an individual enterprise, and land was not a site for community-building but an individual possession.

Nevertheless, Mennonite churches in the United States responded to the crisis in a number of ways – at both the conference and congregational levels – that did not require direct financial aid. One response was the MCC Farm Crisis Hotline operated by the Halders. This service mirrored other hotlines around the country that were set up to help farmers dealing with foreclosures or other farm-related stress. The Halders had personally experienced the trauma of losing their forty-acre farm in 1984 and transitioned to off-farm employment in Iowa City. They volunteered for the position out of a sense that they might be able to save other farmers from some of the emotional difficulties that they experienced. At the height of the crisis, they received about two calls per day. Conversation topics ranged from bank foreclosures to finding off-farm employment and from suicide attempts to discussing the emotional strain felt by women whose spouses did not talk to them about the family's financial difficulties.⁷⁷ A number of individuals called multiple times, which testifies to the value of the service despite the fact that callers were often anonymous and hundreds of miles

away. Though it operated out of Iowa City, the MCC hotline was a nationwide service and welcomed non-Mennonite farmers. It was therefore part of a general movement among Mennonites away from a local understanding of the church community and toward the church expressing itself as a national and ecumenical organization.

At the local level, Iowa's Mennonites helped each other during specific public moments of unexpected difficulty, but mutual aid was less contingent on whether farmers were part of the same religious community, and more contingent on whether they were members of the same rural community. Beyond denominational lines, a sense of local community was the glue that sustained Iowa's Mennonite farmers during the crisis. Though Iowa's small towns were plagued by division in the past – particularly between Anglo- and German-Americans during the First World War and Prohibition – many have displayed a remarkable resiliency in the face of momentous challenges.⁷⁸ According to Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, professor of history at Iowa State University, the survival of small Iowa communities often has less to do with offering a full menu of services – from schools to doctors to grocery stores – and more to do with how well they respond to the specific needs of their particular area.⁷⁹ Riney-Kehrberg writes: “Farmers, in a way unlike any other profession, are place-bound and, as a result, are uniquely dependent upon the small communities that provide necessary services and places of residence.”⁸⁰ During the 1980s, Kalona-area farmers felt the stresses of the larger economic crisis but felt a sense of place that transcended denominational lines and united them during moments of hardship.

One specific incident that highlights the local dimensions of aid during the 1980s was the 1984 tornado that ripped through the tri-county region. In one congregation, West Union Mennonite Church, seventeen families were directly affected by the storm.⁸¹ Brent Yoder – who was a child at the time – nearly had a window shatter in his face after he ran upstairs to turn off the lights. After the family was safely gathered in the basement, he recalled that, “you could have just taken the floor joists and just pushed the house off. It felt like the house was so light.”⁸² All of my interviewees point to this event as a time when Kalona-area Mennonites helped each other out. Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich recalled that their neighbours, in conjunction with volunteers from Mennonite Disaster Service, helped their family clear fields and prepare food. Gerald Yoder recalled neighbours pitching in to clean up the farm the next morning. Yet his son, Brent Yoder, quickly pointed out

that it was not just Mennonites helping Mennonites, but the entire community helping each other.

Imbedded in the larger farm crisis, the 1984 tornado stands out as a time when Iowa's Mennonites practiced solidarity in the face of hardship. It also exemplifies a style of aid that was responsive to specific, public crises rather than individuals' personal economic straits and indicates that rural Mennonites were as reliant on their non-Mennonite neighbours as their Mennonite neighbours. Like their urban and suburban counterparts, rural Mennonites during the 1980s found themselves embedded in several Mennonite and non-Mennonite bodies: the local Mennonite church, the local non-Mennonite community, Mennonite organizations and charities, non-Mennonite organizations and charities, political parties, and the global economy.

Thirty years after the crisis, Iowa's Mennonite farmers continue to base their ideas about farming, the environment, and the use of their resources on private convictions rather than communal precepts or church-wide mandates. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two of the largest issues confronting Mennonite farmers are land use and climate change.

Most individuals interviewed for this project spoke of their farming techniques in the environmental and economic language of stewardship and sustainability. They also view conventional and organic techniques, along with a farm's size and diversity, as a personal decision. Conventional farmers argue their methods are sustainable since they work the land less than organic farmers, economize their use of inputs, and help sustain the world's population. Some also believe that genetically modified organisms and no-till farming protect God's creation by being less impactful on Iowa's diminishing topsoil. Alternately, organic farmers view their type of farming as sustainable because they do not use chemicals and maintain the diversity of their soil, even though they work it more intensively. Calvin Yoder, an organic dairy and chicken farmer stated, "To me, [organic farming] was the right way to do it. The whole principle was to try to get in harmony with the way God created the soil."⁸³ Mark Gingerich, a conventional row crop farmer, maintained that the highest good for a piece of Iowa farm ground would be to "plant oak trees," followed by planting crops in rotations instead of monocultures, and then planting organic monocultures. However, given his family's equipment, experience, and expenses, conventional crop farming is his only practical choice.⁸⁴ In contrast to these individuals, Bishop Vernon Yoder of the Old Order Amish thought that his faith and traditional modes of farm-

ing are two sides of the same coin, since labour-intensive occupations keep individuals from becoming too worldly and prideful.⁸⁵ His views were based less on theological, political, or environmental concerns and more on traditions embedded in Amish culture. In other words, farming with steel wheels is not a theological conviction for the Amish but part of a lifestyle that keeps their operations small and relatively unprofitable. In contrast, Mennonite farmers' opinions were informed by religious sentiment but they had little to do with a distinctly Mennonite or communal way of farming and they did not justify their decision in terms of what the choice meant to their church community.

Respondents also worried that extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe than in decades past but this too was left to individual interpretation. Gingerich stated: "I've been watching weather patterns for fifty years. We're having more extremes."⁸⁶ Others are more reluctant to invoke the spectre of climate change such as Marlin Miller who stated, "The climate change thing, I'm not sure that I just buy all of that... A hundred years ago they also had changes... But I think God is bigger than all that."⁸⁷ Gingerich conceded that "depending on which political party you belong to [affects] whether you believe in global warming."⁸⁸ Such debates about the land necessarily lead farmers to make individual political and economic decisions. Their choices exemplify an individualistic mindset about politics, possessions, and finances that they share with most Mennonites in the United States, whether they live in cities or in the countryside.

America's Mennonites have been primarily associated with agricultural occupations since they arrived in North America over 300 years ago. For better or worse, they were among some of the first Europeans to transform the continent's vast wilderness into farmland. However, the Mennonites are no longer primarily a church of farmers tied to the land and their local communities. Since the mid-twentieth century, Mennonites have decisively chosen to quit the occupation around which much of the denomination's culture was formed. Most individuals who continue to farm do so as agribusiness owners and operators.

The Mennonites' rural-urban shift followed the general contours of American society but it had a few specific effects on the Mennonite Church, which included a marked increase in Mennonite education and service and a widening gulf between Mennonites and their Amish neighbours. These changes directly affect how rural Mennonites and Amish conceive of their place in the world. In the early twentieth century, most rural Mennonites viewed the

local church as the arbiter of religions, economic, and charity activity. In contrast, modern rural Mennonites are less bounded by local considerations and feel free do as they wish with their land, money, time, and resources. In this regard, they resemble their urban counterparts more than they do their parents, grandparents, or Amish neighbours. These changes recast the Mennonite church from a locally- or even conference-oriented denomination to one marked by personal decisions and global interests.

During the 1980s, Mennonite farmers recognized that their local churches and regional conferences could not mitigate their personal economic problems. Members’ financial difficulties only received broader attention if they personally sought it out or if it was a public calamity, such as a tornado or flood. The result is that rural Mennonites have a free hand in how they manage their resources, participate in political activities, and interact with their non-Mennonite neighbours, even as rural Mennonites and non-Mennonites come together as an inter-faith community during local disasters.

Notes

- ¹ Charles H. Myers, *NOAA Technical Memorandum NWS CR-84: An Overview of the June 7, 1984 Iowa Tornado Outbreak* (Des Moines: National Weather Service Forecast Office, 1987), 1.
- ² Gerald Yoder and Brent Yoder interview, interviewed by author, Parnell, IA, June 23, 2014.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonites in Iowa* (Kalona, IA: Mennonite Historical Society of Iowa, 1974), 20.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- ⁸ Holly Blosser Yoder, *The Same Spirit: History of Iowa-Nebraska Mennonites* (Freeman, SD: Central Plains Mennonite Conference, 2003), 117.
- ⁹ See James C. Juhnke, “The 1920s: Moving Forward and Holding Back,” in *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1989), 243-274.
- ¹⁰ R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 63.
- ¹¹ Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1996), 48.
- ¹² Winfield J. Fretz, "Farming Among Mennonites in North America," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified February 20, 2014, accessed September 5, 2016, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title= Farming_Among_Mennonites_in_North_America](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Farming_Among_Mennonites_in_North_America).

- ¹³ Blosser Yoder, 139; Theron Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 127.
- ¹⁴ Blosser Yoder, 139.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ¹⁶ Toews, 186.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188. Toews' numbers are taken from the Church Member Profile of 1972.
- ¹⁹ Hurt, 95, 122.
- ²⁰ Calvin W. Redekop, *The Pax Story: Service in the Name of Christ 1951-1976* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2001).
- ²¹ "Mennonite Church census reveals rapidly changing denomination," *Gospel Herald*, February 14, 1984, 115.
- ²² Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich interview, interviewed by author, Parnell, IA, June 4, 2014.
- ²³ *West Union Mennonite Church Bulletins*, January 10, 2016 and June 5, 2016.
- ²⁴ Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 20-21.
- ²⁵ R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 51.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.
- ²⁷ Strangely, Butz also regarded "food as a weapon" when it came to policy and trade relations with developing countries. See Paul B. Thompson, *The Ethics of Aid and Trade: U.S. Food Policy, Foreign Competition, and the Social Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 20, 82.
- ²⁸ Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich interview.
- ²⁹ Vernon and Inez Yoder interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, July 18, 2016.
- ³⁰ Friedberger, 24.
- ³¹ "Issues facing the Mennonite Church today," *Gospel Herald*, March 3, 1981, 563-565, 598.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 563.
- ³³ This attitude was clearly expressed by Daniel Hertzler in an October 13, 1981 *Gospel Herald* editorial titled "World Food Day." Hertzler called on America's Mennonites to increase awareness of their wealth and food security relative to the rest of the world. He also called on readers to learn about the activities of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization and Bread for the World, two non-Mennonite organizations with a global reach.
- ³⁴ Sharon Miller, "Iowans face Faith and Agricultural Issues," *Gospel Herald*, March 3, 1981, 226.
- ³⁵ "Illinois farmers weigh ethics of 'PIK' program," *Gospel Herald*, January 31, 1984, 97.
- ³⁶ Vic Reimer, "Farmers, academics view land and faith issues," *Gospel Herald*, January 22, 1980, 249.
- ³⁷ Ed and Marge Hershberger interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, June 9, 2014.
- ³⁸ Dave and Jim Yoder interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, July 9, 2014.
- ³⁹ Calvin Yoder interview, interviewed by author, Wellman, IA, June 10, 2014.

- ⁴⁰ Phyllis Pellman Good, "Will Professionalism Destroy the Mennonite Community?," *Gospel Herald*, January 18, 1983, 38.
- ⁴¹ Friedberger, 22.
- ⁴² Hurt, 134.
- ⁴³ Banett, 370; Friedberger, 5
- ⁴⁴ Barry J. Barnett, "The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s," *Agricultural History* 74: 2 (2000): 369. See also Frederick H. Buttel, "The US Farm Crisis and the Restructuring of American Agriculture: Domestic and International Dimensions," in *The International Farm Crisis*, ed. David Goodman and Michael Redclift (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 54.
- ⁴⁵ Barnett, 371. Buttel reports that real estate values in four Midwestern states, including Iowa, increased threefold between 1973 and 1981. These states also saw the sharpest drop in land values during the farm crisis. See Buttel, 55.
- ⁴⁶ Gerald and Brent Yoder interview.
- ⁴⁷ Hurt, 135.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 139; Richard Orr, "Carter promises U.S. guaranteed farm costs," *Chicago Tribune*, August 26, 1976, 2.
- ⁴⁹ Hurt, 141.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 138; David Goodman and Michael Redclift, "Introduction: the International Farm Crisis," in *The International Farm Crisis*, ed. David Goodman and Michael Redclift (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 13; Carl E. Walsh, "October 6, 1979," *Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Economic Letter*, no. 2004-35 (December 3, 2004), 2-3.
- ⁵¹ Hurt, 137.
- ⁵² Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich interview.
- ⁵³ Barnett, 375
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 376
- ⁵⁵ See Bruce Brown, *Lone Tree: A True Story of Murder in America's Heartland* (New York: Crown, 1989).
- ⁵⁶ Friedberger, 68.
- ⁵⁷ Dave and Jim Yoder interview.
- ⁵⁸ Terry Erb interview, interviewed by author, Parnell, IA, June 10, 2014.
- ⁵⁹ Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich interview.
- ⁶⁰ David and Martha Miller interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, July 7, 2014.
- ⁶¹ Delmar and Carolyn Bontrager Interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, July 22, 2014
- ⁶² For more on women's off-farm employment during the 1970s and 1980s and its effects on Mennonite faith and practice, see Kimberly D. Schmidt, "'Sacred Farming' or 'Working Out': The Negotiated Lives of Conservative Mennonite Farm Women," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 1 (2001): 79-102. For more on Iowa women's activism during farm crisis see Mark Friedberger, "Women Advocates in the Iowa Farm Crisis of the 1980s," *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 224-234.
- ⁶³ Vic Reimer, "Farmers, academics view land and faith issues," *Gospel Herald*, January 22, 1980, 249.
- ⁶⁴ "Mennonite Farmers Organize to help each other," *Gospel Herald*, December 11, 1984, 808-809.
- ⁶⁵ Ed and Marge Hershberger interview.

- ⁶⁶ Friedberger, 94.
- ⁶⁷ Dave and Jim Yoder interview.
- ⁶⁸ Friedberger, 92, 174.
- ⁶⁹ Marlin and Mary Miller interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, July 23, 2014.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Conversation with John and Nancy Halder, interviewed by author, Iowa City, IA, June 24, 2016; "Farm Community Issues Coordinators, phone calls," July 23, 1986, privately held by John and Nancy Halder, Iowa City.
- ⁷² Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich interview.
- ⁷³ Daniel Hertzler, "The Farm Problem," *Gospel Herald*, January 8, 1985.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ According to Old Order Amish bishop Vernon Yoder, congregants' medical expenses are often as substantial as the losses that accompany the failure of a business or farm. Citing one example, Yoder stated that care for a premature baby cost the congregation about \$900,000. Vernon and Inez Yoder interview.
- ⁷⁶ Gilbert and Sandy Gingerich interview.
- ⁷⁷ Conversation with John and Nancy Halder; "Farm Community Issues Coordinators, phone calls."
- ⁷⁸ On the divisions among rural Iowans during the First World War see Nancy Derr, "Lowden: A Study of Intolerance in an Iowa Community During the Era of the First World War," *Annals of Iowa* 50 (1989): 5-22. For a more general commentary on these divisions, see Elizabeth Becker, "All White, All Christian and Divided by Diversity," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2001, sec. 4, 7.
- ⁷⁹ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "Persistence, Change, and Thinking Big about Small Places: Some Thoughts about the Practical Applications of Rural and Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 88: 1 (Winter 2014): 8-12.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 14.
- ⁸¹ Gerald and Brent Yoder interview.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Calvin Yoder interview.
- ⁸⁴ Mark Gingerich interview, interviewed by author, Kalona, IA, July 28, 2016.
- ⁸⁵ Vernon and Inez Yoder interview.
- ⁸⁶ Gilbert Gingerich interview.
- ⁸⁷ Marlin and Mary Miller interview.
- ⁸⁸ Gilbert Gingerich interview.