

## **The Harvest of Hope Fund Twenty-Six Years of Responding to WI Farm Families in Distress**

*“We view the deterioration of the family farm system with alarm and pain. It alienates ordinary people from the land, which is God’s gift to all. It saps the strength of rural communities. And it creates a situation where control of food production could be concentrated in the hands of a few. We cannot stand by and see this happen.”*

*Interfaith Statement on Public Policy  
and the Structure of Agriculture*

The facts are inescapable. First, Wisconsin is losing hundreds of farmers every year. Second, for every 7 to 10 farms that are lost, one Main Street business in a small, rural community is lost. Third, the average age of Wisconsin farmers is 57plus and most farm families are not encouraging their children to continue farming the family farm. The key question is who will be producing our food in the not-too-distant future: will we have family farms with widespread distribution of land holdings, or will we have large, corporate farms with land holdings concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy people?

The Harvest of Hope Fund was created in January 1986 to help people of faith take a stand in support of Wisconsin’s family farmers. January, 2012 marks the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Harvest of Hope. During this 26 year period, the fund has generated and dispersed over 1470 gifts totaling more than \$887,000 to Wisconsin farm families in difficult financial situations. The fund provides monies to Wisconsin farm families who need financial assistance for spring planting or to meet emergency needs for food, fuel, medical or veterinary expenses, house or barn fires, electrical cutoffs, machine repair, climatic problems (drought, flooding, frost and hail), overdue taxes or other critical expenses.

The intent of the fund is to provide a simple, straightforward process for Wisconsin farm families in crisis to receive financial assistance. Families submit a brief application and a financial planning form, these are reviewed by the Harvest of Hope Committee, and gifts of up to \$1000 are sent directly to the families in need, usually within one week of when the application is received. Our host church—the Madison Christian Community—covers all of the administrative costs for the fund, so every dollar donated to the fund goes directly to Wisconsin farm families in difficult situations.

While the average gift of \$700+/- is small in relation to the indebtedness of most farmers, this assistance can make a critical difference in crisis situations. Most important, it offers hope and helps to rekindle a family’s energies for resolving a difficult situation. The fund has helped hundreds of farmers stay in business, has helped dozens retain their electric power, has helped some transition out of farming and, in a few cases, has prevented depressed farmers from committing suicide. The critical issue is hope; thus, the title of the fund, Harvest of Hope.

In addition to providing financial assistance to Wisconsin farmers in need, the Harvest of Hope has also been involved in several special projects to assist farm families and raise awareness about the farm crisis. In the winter of 1986, when snow was so deep farmers couldn’t pick corn with mechanical pickers, we organized a Pick and Glean Project where 240 volunteers helped two farmers in the Cottage Grove area pick their corn by hand. After the statewide drought of 1988, we helped organize a hay lift which brought 40 semi loads of hay from farmers in Georgia to assist Wisconsin farmers who were experiencing severe feed shortages in the winter of 1989. In response to historically low hog prices, we organized a pork project in January, 1999 that transported, processed,

and distributed 36 donated hogs to food pantries in Wisconsin: the 5,000 pounds of pork was divided equally between the Community Action Coalition of South Central Wisconsin and the Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee. In 2001, we held a "Breakfast on the Farm" to raise funds for farmers devastated by the Foot and Mouth epidemic in the British Isles; a check for \$1652 was sent to St. Mary's Parish in Llanllugan, Wales to assist farmers in their loss. We also channeled \$8,000 from an anonymous donor in 2001 to help a Blanchardville farm family build an addition on their home so they could provide therapy for their three daughters with autism; they were most appreciative of the donation as well as our help in designing the addition and finding other sources of funding to make it happen.

For the past nine winters, we have been involved in an innovative Winter Farmers Market project initiated by the Churches Center for Land and People. It started with three Winter Farmers Markets in Madison and Milwaukee in the winter of 2003-04 and has grown to several Winter Farmers Markets held in church halls across Wisconsin in recent years (the MCC has hosted markets and/or educational forums for several years). These markets provide income for the Harvest of Hope Fund (farmers raise their prices 10% and donate these funds to the Harvest of Hope) and achieve several other goals as well: provide farmers with income in the winter months; offer people of faith the opportunity to purchase locally and sustainably-produced farm products; and offer churches a chance to create community while standing on the side of land stewardship and economic justice for farm families.

The Harvest of Hope now represents a partnership between the Madison Christian Community, the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Wisconsin Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Madison and the Churches Center for Land and People. While many of our contributions have come from individuals and churches throughout Wisconsin, there have been a few large contributors through the years: Willie Nelson's Farm Aid concerts contributed \$37,500, dating back to 1987; the Kraft Dairy Trust Fund donated \$191,680 over seven years; the United Church Board for World Ministries contributed \$72,255.25 over a few years; the South Central Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America donated \$6,500 in response to the floods of 1993; and an anonymous donor with the Madison Community Foundation has contributed over \$50,000 since 2002.

Is there a need for the Harvest of Hope Fund to continue in the future? The answer is an emphatic "yes!" Over the last 26 years, Wisconsin farmers have experienced an ongoing crisis marked by a number of events: plummeting land values in the mid 1980's; a severe, statewide drought in 1988, followed by feed shortages in 1989; depressed milk prices in 1990 and 1991; the drought of 1992; the heavy rains/floods of 1993; the extreme heat of 1995; the cold, wet spring of 1996; depressed milk prices in 1997 and much of 1998; severely depressed prices for hogs, beef, corn and soybeans in 1998 and 1999; depressed milk prices in 2000-03; a cold, wet spring in 2004; drought and tornadoes in 2005; high input costs (especially fuel, fertilizer and seed) and climatic problems (drought in the north and floods in the south) in 2006-07; floods, high input costs and low commodity prices in 2008-09; and high input costs plus credit problems most recently. There have, quite simply, been few opportunities for farmers to recover from the cumulative stress of the past 26 years. Thus, the need for the fund continues!

Roger Williams, Chair  
Harvest of Hope Fund  
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