

IRCEA Conference, Nov. 2002

VOICES OF THE VOICELESS

The theme came from a Church of South India brochure: "Being the largest Protestant church in India, she celebrates her life with Indian culture and spirituality and she also raises her voice for the voiceless on matters of justice, peace and integrity of creation."

The IRCEA changed this emphasis into an attempt to hear the variety of voices, usually unheard, speaking both from India and from around the world from the rural community.

In today's world, the power in both agriculture and society, lie with big corporations. Rural people are living with vulnerability and despair. As I prepared to go to this conference, I asked some questions of the people in my community in Saskatchewan. Many of their responses were very sad - I had not realized the depth of these peoples' sorrow before. Some of their responses: "Our son couldn't make a reasonable living with our land base and we do not expect him to try"; "I would like my son to farm but am not sure it is practical - we are just not big enough, he would need to have a full-time job and a farm is so much work - leaves too little time to enjoy what we have"; "Our children do farm, but we wish they didn't, as the prices we receive for growing grain and the formidable expenses that one faces in producing grain is becoming very depressing. Most farmers have huge debts that they will be unable to pay"; "The signs of the future are not looking good. Many businesses are closing down, people are leaving the community. There are no opportunities for young people after graduation"; "the community is getting smaller, bigger farms make the whole industry just big business. I worry about the loss of families and the community becoming smaller. I worry people are becoming too much 'is it good for me' and not, 'is it good for all of us'".

The report from the Australian delegation gives a similar picture to that found in Canada, "In Australia there are three significant voiceless groups that the church is trying to represent, advocate for and support. They are the aboriginal community, the declining numbers of farm families, and the struggling rural communities."

Kim Yong-Bok, keynote speaker from Korea says: "the principalities and powers of the market, especially the transnational corporations and their allies, political and intellectual, control the production of agricultural goods, and of the related produces such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, monopolize scientific and technological know-how on genetic engineering, and control and monopolize trade and exchange in the global market. This has made it possible to produce more food. But at the same time, the poverty of rural communities and the number of hungry people are increasing. Ironically, the transnational corporations are increasing their powers of control and monopoly and thus their profits.....Land has become a commodity; its produce has become commodities; genetic modification has been applied to seeds; chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides have polluted the land, the water, the fish and other living creatures. Economically the rural economy is in ruins; socially, the able and young people have migrated to the cities; culturally, rural communities are deserted". He is thinking of the third world's, not the first world's, rural community, and yet the effects are very similar - rising landlessness, depopulation, urban poor. He goes on to say, "degrading of life and erosion of the rural economy (household) is not only detrimental to the rural poor, but to rural community as a whole, to the national community, to the global community and even to the ecological biosphere of the earth as a whole. That is because the rural oikonomia (household of community) is the foundation of the whole of life - industrial and cybernetic as well as agrarian. When the integrity of rural life is sustained, all of life can be sustained." A very similar sentiment comes from a member of my Saskatchewan community, who writes, "An American writer once said, 'If you were to burn down

your cities, and look after your farms, the cities would grow again as if by magic. But, if you destroy your farms, grass will grow on every street.' I believe this to be true, and we are in the process of destroying our farms, especially the important farms - the small family farms."

The conference brought out clearly the voices of the voiceless from the Indian context, the landless, the illiterate, the powerless. Two of the Church of South India's major justice initiatives are the Department of Dalit and Adivasi Concerns, and the Decade of Commitment to the Girl Child. These voices help to give a perspective to situations found in the Canadian context, and ideas, that while not immediately transferable, could have a very positive impact as we "search for new models of ministry, support for the family farm, finding ways to be in solidarity with our First Nations' people, ecumenical shared ministry, reorganizing Canada's multi-cultural, multi-faith mosaic in all its approaches to mission and ministry."

Catherine Christie