Black Farmers in the United States
Prayers and Reflection

OPENING PRAYER
God, Slow us down
So that we may hear and see you
A little more clearly in those who till the land.
Help us to confront
The evil of racism and prejudice,
To see and hear all the farmers in our country,
To understand the barriers that they face.
Our own ways have not worked,
for injustice and discrimination still prevails.
Help us find your way.

Give us the wisdom and courage
To care about those who work the land
and provide us with nourishing food.

We pray that your Spirit
Will continue changing and challenging us
And healing the people and the systems
Dedicated to farming and agriculture.
Amen.
Adapted from a poem by R. Verma

CLOSING PRAYER
On the parched land,
On those thirsty for equality,
May your justice
Roll down like water.

On the farmers of this country,
Especially farmers of color
Whose ancestors were brought here
To work the land
And whose sweat and tears
helped build the nation,
May your justice
Roll down like water.

On all of us
Who want to support and aid
Family farmers who are losing their land,
May your justice
Roll down like water
and restore us to dignity and true community.

REFLECTION
Fundamentally, food and agriculture are about life: life for
the hungry and for all who depend on farmers and farm-
workers for what we eat every day. But they are also
about life for farmworkers who risk their health to pick our
food, sometimes not knowing what pesticides are in the
field. They are about life for subsistence farmers in Africa
trying to feed a family and make a meager living. They are
about a way of life for farm families in the United States
who are unable to meet debt payments and face selling a
farm that has been in the family for generations. These
reflections call all of us to make the protection of life and
dignity the foundation of our choices on agriculture.

“For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food” (Mt 25:35): Catholic
Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers,” United States
http://www.ncrlc.com/Catholic-Reflections-Food.html
Activities

1) Open with the prayer and reflection on page one of this unit.

2) To raise consciousness about the plight of Black farmers in the U.S.,
   a) Have small groups go over the True and False quiz on page 3 and decide on answers.
   b) Have members of the small groups take turns reading the answers on pages 4 and 5.
   c) Discuss what participants found most interesting and most surprising in the information.

3) Read the two case studies on pages 6 and 7. Discuss the following:
   What would it feel like to lose land that was in your family for generations? Has anyone in the group, or their families, experienced such a loss? The Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace issued a document on agriculture saying there is currently a bias in favor of large scale agriculture, but that family farm ownership should be supported (see the full document at the National Catholic Rural Life Conference Web Site, http://www.ncrlc.org). Why is it a loss for our country when family farms give way to large food production corporations? What role does the U.S. Department of Agriculture farm loan system play in supporting, or not supporting, small farmers?

   Bishop Gilmore of Kansas, who chairs the U.S. Bishops Committee on Agriculture, declares there is a “pressing need” for Catholics to connect their faith to the ethical and human dimensions of food and agriculture issues. What are the ethical and human dimensions of the legal case described on page 7? Was this case settled in an ethical way? The Catholic Church clearly states that racism is a sin; why has it persisted, even in government systems? How do we recognize racism in all its forms and reject it as people of faith?

4) End the session with the closing prayer on page 1.

For more information on the Catholic position on farmers, farming and agriculture, see the National Catholic Rural Life Conference web site, http://www.ncrlc.com.
True or False Quiz: Black Farmers in the U.S.

1) In the last year, American taxpayers paid about $22 billion in farm support. Most of this money went toward small, independently owned farmers.
   True or False?

2) Black farmers make up the highest percentage of farmers in the United States receiving loans from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).
   True or False?

3) Discrimination against Black farmers plays a role their inability to secure loans and retain property.
   True or False?

4) Black farmers own more farmland now than they did in the 1920’s.
   True or False?

5) The Land Loss Prevention Project was established in 1983 and has been active in fighting for the land historically belonging to Black farmers.
   True or False?

6) In the battle for justice, Black farmers and allied organizations have been speaking out for justice.
   True or False?

7) The farming lawsuit, Pigford vs. Glickman, was a recent major civil rights case related to Black farmers.
   True or False?

8) Pigford vs. Veneman is the current class action suit against the USDA. It is an entirely different lawsuit than Pigford vs. Glickman.
   True or False?
1) FALSE
Last year, Americans paid a record amount of taxes for farm assistance—$22 billion. Unfortunately, the majority of this money did not go to those small, privately owned, farms in need of assistance, but instead to the 25% largest and wealthiest of American farms, run by large corporations. These corporate farms are causing pollution, eroding soil, and driving family farmers (including African American farmers) out of business.

Several large corporations, such as Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, are controlling more and more of food production and processing in the world, as well as in the United States. Cargill, for example, is a privately owned corporation that has $50 million in sales per year. As the third largest food corporation in the U.S., it is the leader in the world’s exports of grain. While Cargill has been found guilty of manipulating supplies and endangering the environment, it receives favorable treatment from the U.S. government in terms of financial support. Small family farms have a much more difficult time getting support to stay in business, and Black family farmers have had to face even more barriers.

2) FALSE.
Of all the farm loans granted in 1999 by the USDA, 91.4% went to White farmers, but only 2.3% to Black farmers, 4.2% to Hispanic farmers and 1.2% to Native American farmers. The process of securing loans from the USDA has long been difficult for Black farmers in the South. Typically, the turn around time for a loan application is about 30 days, but Black farmers have waited from four months to a year to get approval for a loan. By the time a decision is reached, their loan applications are often denied, allotted insufficient funds or contracted too late to save the family farm.

NOTE: In order to prepare for a farming season, farmers rely heavily on loans from the USDA. After a season of successful crops, they pay off their loans and start over again.

3) TRUE
Discrimination has affected Black farmers ever since the Emancipation in 1865 granted by Abraham Lincoln. While General Sherman’s Field Order #15 allotted each freed slave family in South Carolina and Florida 40 acres of farmland and a mule, the U.S. Congress only permitted the Freedman’s Bureau to sell 5-10 acres of land to each free slave. Even such a reduced acreage cost far beyond what most newly freed slaves, never having received wages, were able to pay. But their children, first-generation free black men and women, were able to buy small farms, which they passed down to younger generations.

However, many Black farmers, over time, have lost their family property because of unjust laws and unjust aid and loan systems. After the Civil Rights era, black farmers began taking their cases to court, demanding not only payment for their losses but also asking for structural changes within the USDA that would not permit discriminatory practices. In 1982, the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights ruled that the primary reason for land loss among Black farmers was due to discrimination. Since then, Black farmers have filed lawsuits against the USDA.

4) FALSE
In 1920, about 14% of all farm lands were owned by Blacks (about 925,000 farmers). Today, less than 18,000 Black farmers (out of 1.9 million) own land. Black farmers are losing an average of 1,000 acres per day—a rate that is about 6 times the rate of White farmers who are losing land.

The large decrease in Black farmers over the past 70 years first started during the Great Migration, between 1914 and 1930. During that time, violence, including unpunished lynchings, and racial discrimination against Black people were so blatant in the South that many migrated North to cities.

After World War II, the Second Great Migration occurred, bringing over 40% of southern Black Americans to the big cities because of the poverty of farm life. By the 1970’s, 6.5 million Blacks had left Southern farms, hoping to find better economic opportunities in cities and in the North.

For those that stayed, discrimination continued. Today, as in the past, farming loans are not being fairly allotted to Black farmers. Additionally, it is difficult for Black farmers to obtain bank credit, as well as disaster aid in times of tornadoes, floods, droughts and hurricanes.
5) **TRUE**
The Land Loss Prevention Project (LLPP) was founded in 1983. This non-profit organization, founded by James B. Hunt, a former governor of North Carolina, is dedicated “to the preservation of the family farm.”

The LLPP has been active in more than ten major court cases seeking justice for farmers, including *Pigford vs. Glickman*. (For more information no this lawsuit, see the answer to question 7.) Visit the LLPP Web Site at http://www.landloss.org/ for more information, as well as ways to support their work for environmental and racial justice.

6) **TRUE**
In an effort to raise awareness and seek justice, Black farmers have been speaking out and participating in non-violent demonstrations, such as the following:

- **March 11, 2000**: Eleven Black farmers are restricted from seeing the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and are arrested on the steps of the USDA. A few days later, another 20 farmers are arrested at the same spot.

- **August 22, 2000**: 1,000 Black farmers picket in front of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to protest the stalling of payment to the thousands of Black farmers who were awarded compensation in the case of *Pigford vs. Glickman*. (See the answer to question 7 for more information on this lawsuit.)

- **September 10, 2002**: 50 Black farmers gather on the steps of a Federal building in Arkansas to protest the fact that discrimination practices still persist three years after the settlement of *Pigford vs. Glickman*.

- **January 17th of every year**: In honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, hundreds of people march through the streets of Atlanta, Georgia every year in an annual show of support for U.S. Black farmers.

7) **TRUE**
In the *Pigford vs. Glickman* lawsuit, 25,000 Black farmers united together to file a discrimination case against the USDA. They filed for $3 billion, claiming that the USDA was guilty of racial discrimination by denying loans, disaster payments and other mandated support to qualified farmers. In addition to the $3 billion payment, the farmers also demanded structural changes to the USDA to ensure more just treatment for all farmers.

The case was settled outside of court in November 1999 for approximately five million dollars—the largest settlement in a civil rights case. However, after legal fees, the agreement resulted in $50,000 for each farmer, much less than the losses they incurred. Moreover, there were no guarantees of structural change in the USDA that would prevent future occurrences of racial discrimination in lending and aid programs. See page 7 of this unit for more information about this lawsuit.

8) **FALSE**
*Pigford* versus *Venemen* is not a different case than *Pigford* versus *Glickman*, but is, in fact, a continuation of the same case. The Land Loss Prevention Project represents thousands of black farmers who are still seeking their $50,000 payment from the USDA, as over 40% of the claims from the original trial have not been paid.
Maddie: A Farmer’s Granddaughter

I never lived on a farm, but my parents did, and my grandparents did. Ever since the Civil War, my family owned a small farm down in North Carolina. My granddad bought the farm from a White man. He worked long and hard and saved all his money so he could buy himself a farm. He wanted a place to have a family and to work for his family. All of his time, money and energy went into that farm. After a few years, the owner wanted his farm back. Granddad fought hard to keep the farm. He was forced to pay more money to the previous owner to keep the farm. When my granddad applied to the Federal Land Grant for the money, the previous owner was angry. He rounded up some of his friends, and shot and killed my grandfather’s animals. But we managed to keep the farm.

My papa grew up on that farm. Overtime though, all his friends started moving north. They all wanted to get away from the violence, the hate, the unfair rules. My papa went north also. There, in Chicago he met my mama. They stayed there to have a family. For holidays and over the summer when I wasn’t in school, we would go down to the farm to visit my grandfather. We would swim, fish, ride on the tractor and help on the farm. I loved going to the farm. I loved my granddad.

Then one year, a drought came to North Carolina in a bad way. It ruined granddad’s cotton crop . . . it also ruined granddad. He lost so much money that year that he had to go to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) office to apply for a loan to help him pay his bills. He waited and waited and waited. Days, weeks, months went by and there was no word from the USDA. I remember the day papa told me that granddad had to put up the farm up for auction. We sat around the kitchen table before dinner and cried and cried.

Two weeks after granddad auctioned off the farm, he received a letter from the USDA about his loan. There was no reason, no explanation: the USDA simply informed him that he would not be receiving financial aid. Now the farm is gone. I can’t go down to the place where generations of my family lived and worked, where my papa was born, and where I had spent so much time having fun. Our family farm is lost forever and no one cares.


“Farming has been the backbone of this nation, and if you break a farmer’s back, you break the backbone of this nation and it’s broken forever. When they do away with the family farmers, they’re going to find out that the American way of life has been crippled.”

Edna Harris, Farmer, Iredell County, North Carolina
Case Study: *Pigford versus Glickman*

**What was the *Pigford versus Glickman* lawsuit all about?**
In April of 1997, about 25,000 Black farmers sued the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for more than $3 billion in compensation for the land and crops they lost due to unfair and untimely loan allotments. They claimed that the USDA used racial discriminatory judgments in deciding if, when and how loans would be granted to many Black farmers. Additionally, the USDA did not provide disaster relief money, credit assistance and other services as required to these farmers.

Several farmers took the stand telling their own stories about the dramas they suffered in securing loans. Claims of discrimination were upheld by governmental investigations done in 1965, 1970, 1982, 1990 and three reports in 1997. It was verified that Black farmers did, indeed, have more rejections than other equally qualified White farmers, they had to wait longer (sometimes up to months longer) for their loan approvals, and they were denied their full loan allotments in many cases.

**What was the verdict in *Pigford versus Glickman*?**
The court case lasted three years. Many African-American and Civil Rights organizations did not initially provide support. Eventually Democrats in Congress, the NAACP and others became involved. Rallies in the South and in Washington, D.C. received public support and media coverage.

Finally, in November of 1999, the suit was settled out of court. The Black farmers were awarded approximately five million dollars. *Pigford versus Glickman* became the largest settlement in a Civil Rights case in history. This was to result in a payment of about $50,000 to each farmer by “consent decree.”

**Was Justice Served?**
- The Black farmers were kept out of the negotiation process that decided the terms of the consent decree.
- The final award was not sufficient to cover losses suffered. The judgement sought by the farmers allotted each person about $75,000-$100,000 for compensation.
- No demands were made upon the USDA to change their policies regarding racial discrimination.
- There was a catch in the terms of the consent decree. Each farmer, in order to actually receive their $50,000 payment, had to plea his or her individual cases, a practice that is not traditionally mandated in a class action suit. (He or she is typically able to collect payment as part of the represented group). In this case, each farmer was required to prove his or her individual case in the most demanding of ways:
  1) Each farmer had to have a one-day mini-trial to provide evidence that they were victims of discrimination.
  2) The evidence that was required was difficult to obtain quickly—each farmer had to demonstrate a white farmer in a similar situation was awarded funds while they were denied money. *(White farmers were not inclined to cooperate out of fear that the USDA would “punish” them in the future by not awarding them loans.)*
- 400 farmers pursued a fairness hearing, which was overturned.
- Many farmers, tired of fighting, gave in and attempted to secure their payment of $50,000. Lawyers assured them that 80-90% of all claims would be met. In the end, however, 40% of claims were turned away, and a total of 8,025 farmers were denied payment.