

# The untold life of the 21st-century farmer

From seed patents to suicides in India to the demise of the American small farm, farmers are struggling to survive. Will the church answer?

BY ANDREW KANG BARTLETT

On September 10, 2003, Lee Kyung Hae, a 56-year-old Korean farmer, took his own life with a knife to the heart. Shortly before doing so, he handed out a flyer to the delegates of the World Trade Organization summit in Cancún, Mexico. A decade later, his words still claw at me.

We Korean farmers realized that our destinies are no longer in our own hands. We cannot seem to do anything to stop the waves that have destroyed our communities where we have been settled for hundreds of years. . . . I am crying out my words to you, that have for so long boiled in my body. I ask: for whom do you negotiate now? For the people, or for yourselves? . . .

Farmers who gave up early have gone to urban slums. Others who have tried to escape from the vicious cycle have met bankruptcy due to accumulated debts. For me, I couldn't do anything but just look around at vacant houses, old and eroding. Once I went to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I could do nothing but listen to the howling of his wife.

The flyer was a kind of last will and testament from a man who moments later, standing atop a police

barricade, climbed the fence that separates the excluded from the included and took his life.

Lee knew that conditions were looking dire for farmers. Free-trade agreements were flooding countries like South Korea and Peru with cheap farm imports, sinking prices and deepening debt for indigenous farmers. And in many cases conditions have only worsened since. Whether growers of cotton in West Africa, sugar in the Caribbean, or rice in South Korea, small family farmers are suffering the brunt of these agreements and their patent regulations for seeds and medicine.

Adopting the language of sustainable agriculture and asserting that their efforts will feed the world, multinational biotech companies like Monsanto are investing millions of dollars in genetically modified (GM) seeds. Though strongly contested by the Union of Concerned Scientists, the claim is that GM seeds produce higher yields while using fewer resources. Adapted to large mechanized farms, these seeds have become quite profitable—for the corporations who own and patent them. While some large-scale farmers are also profiting, many other farmers have become trapped in a system that drives up debt, consolidates small farms into monocultures of commercial crops, and undermines traditional farming practices—all while

raising unanswered questions about environmental impact and the safety of the GM food we are all eating.

Today's farmer, instead of saving seeds from one crop to the next as has been done for centuries, is forced to buy all new seeds each year. These companies have invested a lot of money into creating these seeds, and it's natural that they'd want to see a return on that investment. The problem is that farmers increasingly have no choice but to use their seeds.

Not all farmers consider this arrangement a problem. Many believe they are witnessing the next stage in agricultural progress. Others don't like it but perceive no viable alternatives. Yet others are *creating* alternatives.

In northern Cameroon, villages are partnering with the Presbyterian Hunger Program to store their seeds in community grain banks. As a result, farmers are no longer at the mercy of market forces and lowest prices; they get to take back some control over their destiny.

On a larger scale, Presbyterians are writing to Congress through the Office of Public Witness to express concern for the expansion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free-trade agreement being negotiated largely in secret that could worsen things further. Presbyterians are requesting that the contents of the TPP be revealed and subjected to democratic processes.

In many ways, however, the experience of the 21st-century farmer—whether positive or negative—has been relegated to silence in the church. It's difficult to talk about these things when you're a church that includes Monsanto employees, farmers using GM seeds, organic farmers, and serious gardeners growing food for their families. Emotions run high when the life-and-death matter of food is under discussion. But it is a conversation we can no longer afford to neglect, not when the well-being of our farmers and all who eat their food is at stake.

Though the momentum at times seems too much to bear, as we plug fingers into the bulging dike of planetary crises, we the church have something uniquely powerful to offer the world: faith. We enter the fray not because we expect to succeed but to join hands with those who labor in the silent places and in whom Christ dwells.

May we listen to the voices in the following pages: for the deep yearnings and wisdom in them, and deeper still for the divine movement and love of life that enfolds all. Let us celebrate it while we can!

He said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God?"

... It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the

smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the largest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."—Mark 4:30–32

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**Jaff Bamenjo**, coordinator of the Joining Hands network in Cameroon, with sacks of grain in the grain bank of the Gozemey community

