

Family Foundations

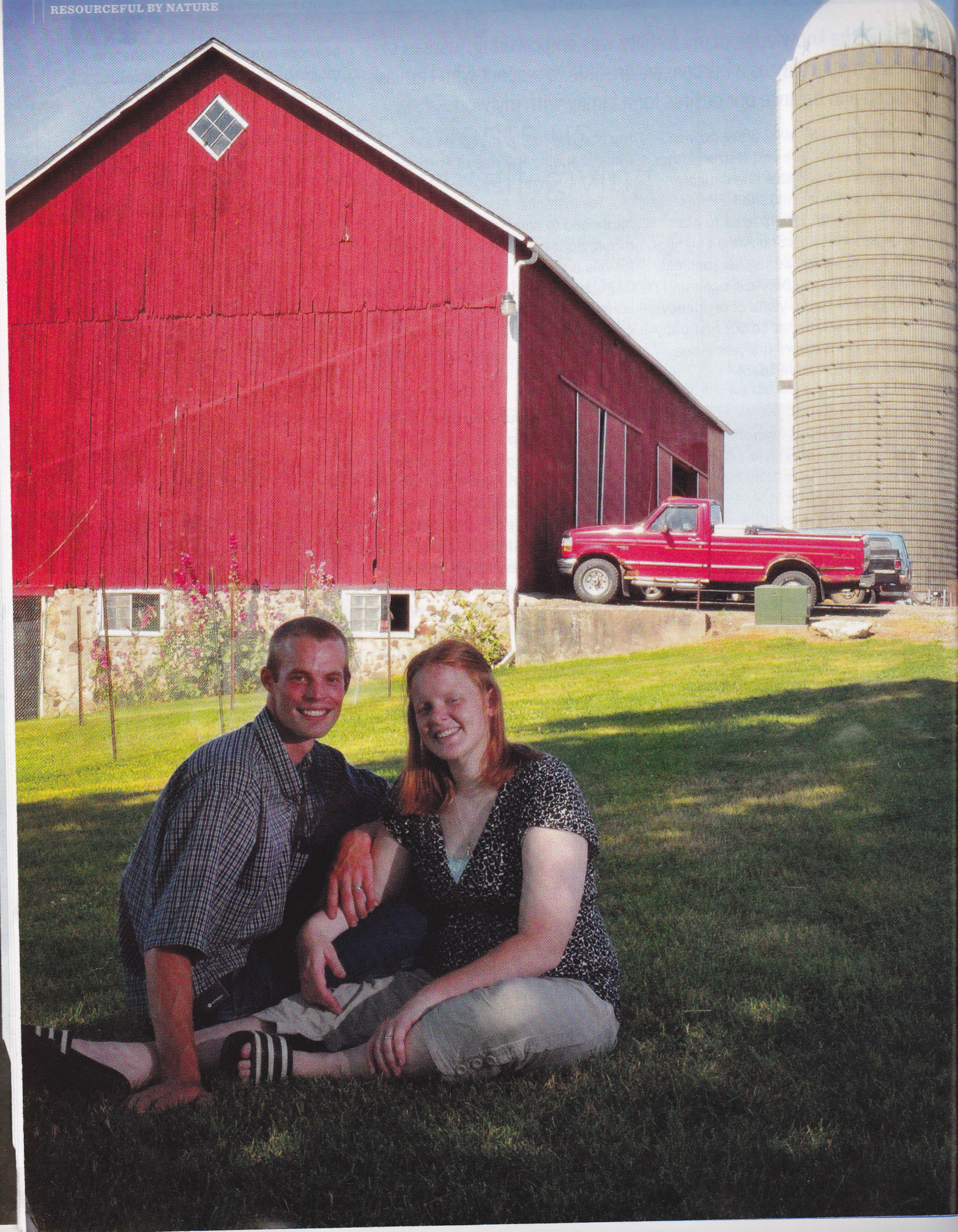
Down on the farm

Lifestyle and livelihood converge for CCL's farm families

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Resourceful *by* nature

Farm families who use NFP enjoy a unique integration of lifestyle and livelihood *by Kathleen M. Basi*

When Jim Noll gets up to teach NFP, he tells students something most of their peers will never hear: A rooster's sperm can survive for weeks in a hen's reproductive tract.

"I tell them that so they don't think five days' viability is a big deal," he said.

Noll, a retired veterinarian from Edgewood, Ky., came to NFP after their sixth child was born prematurely, living only a few days. During their CCL classes, Jim recognized the same patterns he had been working with in animals his whole career. "I know that!" he said. "Why didn't we think about it before?"

For farmers who use NFP, their daily work underscores these connections. "You don't plant a seed today and harvest a crop tomorrow," said Noll. "It takes time."

"Understanding the seasons, the dying and rising, means it doesn't take much for me to understand that the body would also have seasons," said CCL teacher-in-training Tom Ramthun, a 27-year-old cattle and grain farmer from West Bend, Wis. "Nature can be so intensely beautiful — the amazing skylscapes and life and plants

and animals. I just can't separate marriage and our relationship from that feeling of completeness in nature. Our marriage and relationship is part of this intensely beautiful creation."

Because they are accustomed to living by the cycles of nature, NFP seems inevitable. "We are so dependent on nature and so, in a sense, NFP is a lot like watching the weather forecast: Things can change, but we can plan because we have better knowledge of what is coming ahead," Ramthun said.

The spiritual insights CCL farmers glean are abundant — and worth celebrating this harvest season.

"Farming is a constant giving of the future to God," said CCL Teaching Couple Mary-Lynn Ott, who, with her husband, Tom, owns a dairy farm in Modesto, Calif. "NFP is a constant giving as well."

Medical acumen

Working with animals clarifies many things. "We teach both a farming community and a city one," said Ott. "We have had a few laughs over a few guys mentioning that the 'mucus sign is not a problem because a cow has mucus when it's in heat too.'"

As a veterinarian, Jim Noll made connections that many might never consider. "Contraception treats people like animals," he said. "I'll artificially inseminate a cow, spay a dog — but I also eat cows. You use something that

Less than 1% of Americans are employed as farmers.

belongs to you. That's not how people should be in relation to each other. We're the owners of the animals, but God is the owner of us."

Noll is particularly vehement on the subject of the birth control shot Depo-Provera. "I hate that stuff. When I graduated in 1970, vets had already stopped using that with dogs because it was too dangerous." Even today vets still don't advise using it, due to the risk of mammary tumors, breast cancer, metabolic problems and more. "Yet the doctors give it to our daughters!"

Tom Ramthun's wife, Amanda, notes that in our culture "we think we have to intervene with our natural rhythms and make them coincide with our plans, instead of changing our plans to fit our natural rhythms, as we often have to do in farming. My fertility cycle just seems like a short version of a year-long farming season."

To CCL member Emily Stiegelmeier, who runs a certified organic farm in Selby, S.D, the parallel is obvious. "Why did Jesus use agricultural parables?" she asked. "Because people understood nature."

But seeing the correspondence doesn't mean NFP is always easy to practice. The Otts point out that very few of the farmers in their area are on board with NFP — and it was a tough sell for them as well.

"We have always been tied to farming, but NFP was a challenge in the beginning," Mary-Lynn said. "In farming the recognition is already there that you do not have control, but when it came to NFP we did not make the connection. As we've grown in our faith, giving our fertility to God became easier."

Still, those who have made the

connection find that their work and faith lives are uniquely integrated. "Farming and NFP complement each other," Tom Ramthun said. "They fit in a holistic way of understanding creation."

Feast & famine

In every life there are times of

feast and times of famine. But for farmers, those times are quite literal. "You understand how dependent you are on God," Stiegelmeier said. "I don't control the weather; God controls the weather. Recognizing our dependency on God on the farm becomes how we live."

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Operating a dairy is one of the most demanding jobs in the world. Cows must be milked twice a day, every day, year round.

Each cow has one calf per year and milks for 10 months. Then she needs a two-month break before bearing another calf and starting the process over. A typical dairy farmer can expect to have calves throughout the year.

There is no such thing as a day off. And vacation time? That's hard to come by.

Unless you're Jerry and Amy Geisler.

Dairy genius

by Kathleen M. Basi

Jerry and Amy grew up on dairy farms only a few miles away from each other in northern Wisconsin. In the spring of 1988, when they decided to get married they went to a premarital seminar, which is where they first heard about NFP.

"It clicked for us right away," Jerry said, "because we had been doing that all our life with cows." In a dairy herd, cows are impregnated via artificial insemination. Because the farmers control the process, they have to keep track of their cows' cycles — including monitoring mucus that would look very familiar to women who use NFP.

Jerry and Amy had been married for a decade before it occurred to them they could use their NFP knowledge to give themselves some time off. "We were coming back from a party — we'd had to leave early because we had to get home to milk. We said, 'What are we going home for? We're missing the party!' And it occurred to us: 'Why don't we breed the cows so they all calve at the same time?'"

That year the Geislars waited until Thanksgiving Day to start breeding and they bred the herd at the same time. That meant that the cows all went into their rest period during July and August the following year in preparation for fall calving.

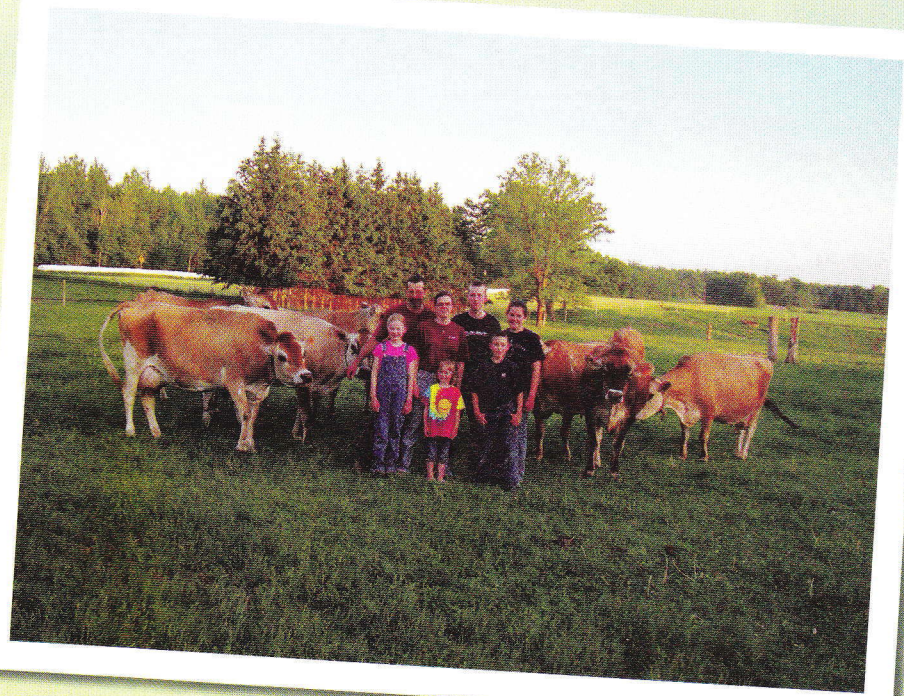
And just like that, the Geisler family had six to eight weeks off milking.

It's not exactly a vacation; they still have to put up the crops. But the break from milking frees them to travel with their five children, have leisurely breakfasts by the campfire, or do projects that wouldn't get done otherwise.

Of course, like humans, not all cows

can have eight to 10 cows showing signs of fertility in one day. I have to take a piece of paper out to keep track of them all."

But Jerry thinks finances are the real obstacle. "When we quit milking cows, we don't get a paycheck for six to eight weeks. I think the biggest holdback for a lot of farmers is they can't make it without that check



get pregnant on schedule. "They may not ovulate, I may not get them bred at the right time, or it may be bad semen," said Jerry. "But in our herd, we have a really good conception rate."

Synchronizing the herd is possible because Jerry does his own insemination, without having to depend on an artificial insemination technician's schedule. "I will breed early morning, late at night — I watch them. I know when they need to be bred."

Jerry keeps trying until the window closes for a September or October delivery. Any cow that does not calve in September or October gets sold to another farmer.

It sounds terrific.

So why doesn't everyone do it?

First, because the time off comes at a price. "Fall is very intense," Amy said, "with canning and getting going with schooling and getting the harvest in, on top of calving."

Jerry puts it this way: "We can have five to eight cows calve the same day. Sometimes I will get up several times in the night to check on the cows. We can't afford to lose one. And when I start inseminating, we

coming in. In the wintertime when the cows are milking good, we put away a couple checks to make it through that dry time."

Sound familiar? Times of feasting, times of abstinence?

For the Geislars, marrying NFP to their vocation as farmers has been a rich blessing. "We have a lot more fun, more time for the kids," Jerry said. "We're really busy in the fall and early winter, and then everything levels out. It's hard work for a short time but not forever."

Perhaps the greatest blessing is the chance to show their five children, all homeschooled, how faith and work can be intertwined. "Even the 6-year-old knows what clear mucus means," Jerry said with a laugh. "Many of our nieces and nephews have learned about the natural rhythms of life here on the farm."

Everyone has their job. "The girls take care of the calves, the oldest son does all the feeding," Amy noted. "They're learning about life."

'Father to the fatherless'

When her husband died in a farming accident, Emily Stiegelmeier got a crash course in trusting God.

As told to Kathleen M. Basi

My husband, Jim, and I had just emerged from a time of tension in our marriage, and we were celebrating with a special family dinner.

Jim stopped work for our evening meal, and when he went back out, he brushed a tear from my cheek and said, "I will lead you. Let me lead you."

already starting to swell, but there was still recognition. When you're one flesh with somebody...it's like Jesus saying, "My sheep know my voice."

He tried to turn to me when he knew I was there.

Lord, please, I prayed, we still need him. Jim was in a coma for a week.

God gave us a Christian doctor, who told me, "There is a difference between prolonging life and prolonging death." After we made the decision to remove the respirator, I went into the ICU for the last time. When I come back out, I thought, I'm going to be a widow.

When Jim died six of my seven children were still living at home. I had to be their mother and manage this farm. I thought of all those lessons we learn as children: God is mighty, omnipotent, and so on. I realized that my faith was on the line. I had to choose to live as if that were true.

In CCL we understand that mother-baby closeness; we're very close to our children and we don't just leave them. But now that I run the farm, I've had to leave young children unsupervised, without adult influence, way too often.

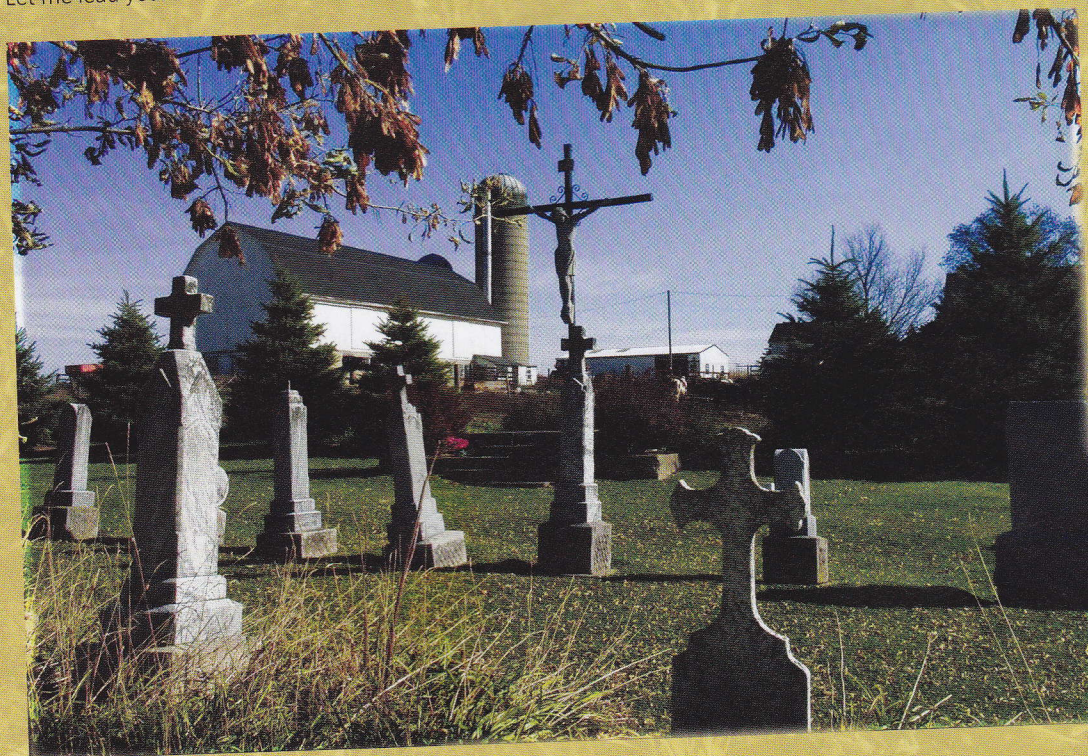
Psalm 68 says that God will be "Father of the fatherless, defender of widows." I asked myself, "What do I need to do to allow that to happen?" I had to trust God to heal my children's broken hearts.

We have seven children, but we also dealt with miscarriage and infertility, and we decided that we would accept all the children God would give us. After that decision, God blessed us with three complete pregnancies in four years. I said, "OK, Lord, this child was your idea, you can get me through it." Trusting God with those things is what allowed me to trust God after Jim's death.

The farm belongs to God — we just get to use it. He's responsible for the rain, the hail storms, the blizzards; He's respon-

sible for making those crops grow. We're gonna die and not own it anymore, anyway. It's a whole lot easier just to let Him be in charge of it.

Since Jim's death we've kept a journal of how God's working in our lives and what we're grateful for. To link the good things in our lives, even to be grateful for the bad things, is a huge lesson.



Two and a half hours later, I had just read bedtime stories to the kids when I heard my oldest son's voice on the two-way radio: "Mom, call 911! Dad rolled the 4-wheeler!"

I called 911 and told my daughter to call the prayer chain, and I left, in my shirt sleeves, with the phone in my hand. When I got to Jim's side out on the dirt road, he recognized my voice. His brain was

A CCL convention was going on, and people prayed for us throughout it. But I had to recognize that even though God is capable of miraculous healing, he doesn't have to. That is His choice.

At the end of that week, I had to make the decision to remove the respirator. Jim and I had talked about end-of-life issues, so I knew what I needed to do, but it was still really difficult.

Photo by Sam Lucero, SamLucero.com

The good times on the farm are very good. For the Ott's, raising children on the farm tops the list of the blessings of rural life. Having space for kids to run outside made them more willing to have a larger family. Mary-Lynn loves nursing her babies while she looks out the window and patio door into the open fields.

But it can also be difficult.

"The busy times of year don't always coordinate with my fertility cycles," said Amanda Ramthun. When we were trying to delay pregnancy, there were many times when Tom was working extremely late during Phase III, so our abstinence time was lengthened simply because he couldn't be home. We had similar problems when we were trying to achieve pregnancy."

Emily Stiegelmeier knows the ups and downs of rural life more intimately than most. After an accident claimed her husband's life (see page 14), she became a farmer in addition to a homeschooling mother of seven. That year also marked the beginning of a five-year drought.

One particularly difficult day, struggling with the burden of her responsibilities, she sensed a message from God: "You've got the easy part. You've just got to put that seed in the ground. I'm the one who makes it grow."

And grow it did.



"My fertility cycle just seems like a short version of a year-long farming season." Amanda Ramthun



The Stiegelmeier farm produced crops during each of those dry years. "There was nothing I could have done to make that ground produce," she said. "Some of it was Jim's management practices, but really it's God."

Passing on the legacy

The integration of work and faith gives the Ott's great hope that their children will inherit more than just a farm. "In our evening prayers, we pray to St. Isidore for our crops and farm, St. Francis to protect our animals, and St. Bridget to protect our workers," Mary-Lynn said.

The Stiegelmeier children have grown up recognizing the link between farm work and NFP work. They sat on their parents' laps during CCL classes, listening in, and then they saw it in action on the farm. Now, as her children prepare for marriage, they don't need much NFP instruction.

"My son said, 'I think we get it, Mom. How different can it be from cows?'"

These days, Stiegelmeier is preparing to hand over control of the farm to the next generation. When she and her husband were young, Jim's parents gave them land to help them get started. She plans to do the same for her children. "It can feel a little scary, but when I started realizing the big picture, I felt very free," she said.

The lessons Stiegelmeier learned from the farm have helped her manage her burdens, but they are just as valuable to those of us off the farm.

"God created this world perfect," she said. "It's fallen, but there's still so much that works the way God intended it to work. Why would we mess with it? Trusting God with your fertility is no different from trusting him with your crops. He really is in control."