

Canada's Farm

Elaine Froese is a farm succession consultant based in Boissevain, Manitoba. She brings peace and Christ-like principles to the tumultuous mix that can be family, farm and very strong feelings.

By Andrew Douglas

Elaine Froese leans her elbows on her office desk, hands clasped near her face. Her hand reaches to push aside a stray hair, straighten her glasses or rub her eyes. Late afternoon sunshine floods her office. Today, she looks weary. "By springtime, all I want to do is spend time in my garden," she says.

Froese is being pushed to recount last winter's worth of hurt and healing she walked farming families through – often while seated at their kitchen tables. Sometimes to find healing it takes looking at old wounds – evaluating damage, figuring out a remedy. It can be exhausting when you're the one poking and prodding.

She isn't a pastor, although she has a pastor's heart. But she is the face of the Church, bringing Christ to businesses and families enduring very trying circumstances.

Froese is good and is paid well to travel the world offering seminars and conducting consults via Skype with farm families as far away as Ireland, Wales, Australia, the U.S. and Canada.

Like an ever-growing slice of the Canadian population in general, the families Froese works with go to church once a year, if that.

Froese finds great joy in her work. It's her calling. After a short season of recuperating she'll soon be ready to start meeting again. This chair at the kitchen table is one of her favourite places in the world, a place where she helps others sort through very hard things. Ultimately, her work energizes her.

Farm succession, or business continuance as Froese prefers to call it, is complicated. Families keep lawyers and accountants on speed dial through a process that can take years to fully roll out.

Farming is hard work. The back-breaking labour transfers naturally to the next generation and their young muscles. But the management and decision making on farms is a dance of release of power and control. And ownership of the assets is the last piece to be relinquished – and sometimes not without a fight.

"There's a deep despair that comes from years of frus-

tration of things not working out the way you'd hoped," says Froese. And in most families, the fact there's no history or mechanism for healthy conflict resolution can make things worse.

Around a kitchen table Froese joins an aging farmer and his family. It's an emotionally charged atmosphere. One side of the table talks openly and passionately about the aging father's retirement – either because they have a new vision or because they want to cash out their inheritance. Children push parents to confront their own mortality. To not plan properly could mean a huge tax hit. The other side – the older side – is equally passionate about the status quo.

There are healthy families that do farm succession well. But if there are any unresolved hurts, they tend to surface quickly when the stakes are so high – control of a valuable business where the land alone is often worth millions of dollars, not to mention the family roots that tend to run deep in rural Canada.

"I've had people take a swing at me from across the table," Froese says.

There's been massive consolidation in the agricultural industry in Canada over the past 30 years. The vast majority of farms in Canada are family owned, but they're bigger than ever before. These are large businesses with significant capital investments and a lot of momentum. But as of the last farm census published in 2011, the average age of farmers in Canada has climbed to 54.

To many farmers retirement is a dirty word. "They are reluctant to let go of their current role because they have nothing to go towards," Froese explains. "Typically their spouse has already let go and wants to travel, visit friends, move to the grandkids. But the males haven't created a life to go to off-farm."

And farmers love to farm. They love their land. They feel protective of it. It has often been a hard life, but a good life. It's tough to let it go with grace.

Froese isn't afraid of saying hard things. One time she listened to a farmer in his early 70s explain he wanted two more years of farming so he could say he'd harvested

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Whisperer

50 crops. His wife wanted to sell the farm and move into town to be near the grandkids. "She's given you the best 40 years of her life," said Froese. "When is it her turn to get what she wants?" The farmer cried.

The majority of those Froese coaches aren't believers. A connection to godly principles in a family could be a generation or more old. Froese is up front about her faith, praying a blessing over families and ushering Kingdom principles into mediation. She says the words "forgiveness" and "hope" often around the kitchen table.

"I give people a sense of hope and a chance to let go of the past so they can work towards what God has created for them," she says.

After nearly 30 years working with farm families, she has learned that having a functional model of forgiveness is foundational to healthy family life. Unfortunately, in many families it's a pretty wobbly cornerstone.

"Most families avoid conflict and become passive-aggressive with periodic explosions, or they try and manipulate each other," she says. "If you have a clear model of forgiveness and make quick repairs, your family workplace is much healthier because things don't get blown out of proportion."

Froese has a degree in home economics from the University of Manitoba, but it's a coaching certificate from the Hudson Institute of Coaching in Santa Barbara, California she draws on the most. That training gave her insight into how age and position affect family dynamics.

She says that around the farmhouse kitchen table, the mother is often tired. She's been the mediator for years, smoothing over hurt feelings. The son – sometimes as old as 40 or 50 – has been itching to prove his mettle as the head of the farm. The biggest wild card at the table is usually the daughter-in-law. She didn't grow up in the family. She's experiencing everything with fresh eyes. Sometimes she doesn't like what she sees. And



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Navigating Conflict Farm Whisperer-Style

In the business world and in life in general, you're going to face conflict. Instead of shrinking back, consider it an opportunity to live out Colossians 1:27: "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Elaine Froese, a farm succession consultant (www.elainefroese.com), offers tips for bringing Christ-like principles into conflicts.

- Come from curiosity, not judgment, and make it your goal to understand the other person.
- Share your intent and why seeing this conflict resolved is important to you.
- Make requests rather than using "I need this" statements.
- Be open to new possibilities.
- Remove your conflict filters that keep you from being empathetic.
- Seek to find common interests and goals.
- Make quick repair. Don't let irritations grow.
- Use the model of forgiveness Jesus taught, and always be ready to forgive.
- Appreciate the context of the story being shared.

then there's the father, likely happy with all he's built and suspicious of anyone trying to upset the cart. He's at the head of the table, silent, arms crossed.

But in this day and age the table can get crowded with even more sad family dynamics. They may all be present in many Canadian families – kids struggling with substance abuse, second marriages with blended families, common-law relationships, boyfriends, girlfriends and the aftermath of affairs. But add a family farm business to the mix and the issues take on even more weight.

"I give families the sacred gift of listening," says Froese.

"I often let silence do the heavy lifting. My presence or just the threat of me coming is enough to get people talking. I'm someone who can hold their story and make sense of it, and offer new scenarios for the next chapter of their lives."

Farmers work on-farm all summer, so winter is crammed full of meetings for Froese. "You wouldn't want to do this without the wisdom and counsel of the Holy Spirit because where else is your power going to come from?" she asks.

Froese paces herself. She suffered serious post-partum depression when her daughter was born. She knows what the darkness looks like up close.

"My husband is home for lunch," she says, drawing our conversation to a close. Her husband has a demanding job running a large farm and selling seed to neighbours. Spring is his time to push hard. He needs her support. Froese has clearly learned to draw boundaries. She could be talking on the phone all night if she answered every call from clients.

Soon enough, she will be run off her feet again. There are lots of families who need Christ in their kitchen. **FT**

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