



Steward of the Land

Covenant farmer Rick Nelson receives a notable award. | **MARIANNE PETERS**

Like the other four recipients of the 2009 Prairie Farmer Master Farmer award, Rick Nelson didn't think he deserved it.

He did feel gratified, however. Only five Illinois farmers received the annual award sponsored by *Prairie Farmer* magazine and Growmark, a regional cooperative network of farm suppliers. The five recipients were recognized for their leadership on the farm and in the community.

"I told my wife as we left the ceremony, 'This is as good as it gets,'" says Nelson. "There's no higher award for an Illinois farmer."

"Illinois farmer" is not just a label for Rick Nelson, it's a succinct description of his personal history. Four generations of Nelson farmers have tilled the land near Paxton, Illinois. Currently Nelson and his wife, Pat, both members of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Paxton, farm 2,100 acres of corn and soybeans. It continues to be a family business; younger son Michael—along with his

wife, Amanda—works alongside his dad the way Nelson did a generation before.

Years of experience, as well as family heritage, have given Nelson a long perspective on his profession. Farming fundamentals are the same, he believes, but that doesn't mean the landscape hasn't shifted. Nowadays, farming has as much to do with learning new technologies, managing a business, and coping with the uncertainties of the weather and the markets as it does with raising a crop. Nelson's faith is his best resource for the challenges of life on and off the farm.

Set aside the image of a single sunburned guy on a tractor. These days, farming requires sophisticated equipment. On the farm, Nelson uses satellite guidance technology when he's planting so that no acre of land is wasted. The planter's on-board computers tell him exactly how many seeds go into the ground in the spring.

This technology also allows him to employ methods of planting such

as strip-tilling. The planter is actually steered through the field by the computer as it drops seeds into tilled strips just inches wide. It does this by tracking the exact location where fertilizer was applied to those strips the previous season. This approach prevents top-soil erosion by disturbing as little of the ground as possible during planting.

Being a good steward of the land is important to Nelson. "I'm just a name on the title," he says. "I'm just borrowing the land for my lifetime before it passes on to someone else."

On the farm, Nelson not only stewards the land, but he also manages people, money, and equipment. He is employer, landlord, accountant, financial forecaster, savvy market-watcher, and mechanic. He serves on the administrative boards of several organizations and cooperatives, and he runs an elevated scraper and back-hoe operation in addition to farming.

"As the farmer, I'm the one in charge," says Nelson. "I have to make the decisions that other people depend

on.” Along with managing the farm, he knows he has to manage himself, too. It’s important, he says, to be self-motivated, identify what needs to be done, and then prioritize, judging not only what’s important, but also factors such as weather and soil conditions.

Nelson credits his parents and grandparents with his farming philosophy, which emphasizes hard work and saving, not spending. For example, as much as possible, he buys high-quality used farm implements, rather than new models. (A new combine can cost as much as \$300,000.) Most of the equipment repairs are done on the farm. “We always say, ‘Somebody put this together, so I can take it apart and fix it,’” he says.

year, but I’m going to plant this seed, see what grows, and be thankful for what we have,” says Nelson. “I have to go with it, believing that God’s in control and will provide for us.” A biblical model for him is Joseph, who helped the Egyptians store up grain for the lean years. “I have to be prepared for the unexpected,” he says, “to make provision when I can, but also trust God.”

Off the farm, the family helps lead worship and teach Sunday school, and Nelson—an avid musician—is helping pioneer a music outreach called rock ’n roll church, a nontraditional service geared to people who don’t have a church home.

The Nelson family’s farm was



Rick and Pat Nelson are active members of Evangelical Covenant Church in Paxton.

Farming is often associated with a simple, bucolic lifestyle—the reality is more complex. Weather changes, shifting crop and soil conditions, prices, and equipment breakdowns are always unpredictable. “I tell people that they shouldn’t get into farming unless they can deal with the variability and the uncertainty,” Nelson says. “During planting and harvesting times, especially, the hours are long and things are really hectic. You are busy from the time you get up in the morning until nine or ten o’clock at night.”

The Nelson family’s faith provides a firm foundation despite the unpredictability of an agricultural life. “I tell myself, maybe it won’t be the perfect

founded in 1910; it will turn 100 years old next year, a rarity in today’s changing farm environment. Nelson says that winning the Master Farmer award won’t change his life. “You don’t do what you do all the time just for the sake of an award,” he says. However, it does challenge him to continue to work hard. “I’m more aware that others are watching my life, and that by setting the bar higher, I need to strive to live up to that standard of excellence,” he says.

If future generations follow his example, Nelsons may be farming near Paxton for another 100 years. ■

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