

“FOOD, FARMING AND FAITH” (A Panel Presentation by DTH at an AAR Pre-Conference Symposium in Washington, DC, 11/17/ 2006. Revised 2009.)

I was asked to clarify what mainline Protestant Churches in the USA are saying and doing about food and agriculture policies and practices; and to explore how we, teachers/scholars and members of religious communities, can contribute to food security and a just and sustainable food system.

Food has always been a feature of religious rituals, fellowship, and injunctions to share. Religious leaders in agrarian societies paid close attention to how food was raised, harvested or slaughtered, sold and utilized. But today’s monotheistic faith communities -- embedded in agriculturally industrialized, mass market society – have lost touch with their traditions.

The most basic teaching about food in Judeo-Christian scriptures is the ethical priority of feeding the hungry and acting justly toward the poor. Making sure that everyone has enough food is the most prominent moral obligation at the center of the faith community’s way of life in response to a covenanting God. As Bruce Birch & Larry Rasmussen put it in *The Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Augsburg, 1989, 184) “The witness of both Old and New Testaments makes clear that concern for those who are forced to live a marginal existence in hunger and poverty is not an optional activity for the people of God.” It is not a minor requirement to be met with token charities; it is a moral imperative “at the heart of what it means to be the community of faith.”

In a similar vein consider the Jubilee vision in Leviticus (& in the Gospel of Luke’s portrait of Jesus’ ministry). It prioritizes sabbaticals for the land and justice to the poor – as expressions of what I propose for our time are ECO-JUSTICE values. With this ethical frame, religious communities and faith-based NGOs are mandated to do much more than provide free meals or direct food relief to respond to hunger and to overcome poverty.

As mainline churches in North America began to realize after the 1974 World Food Conference in Rome, Christians must get serious about more than charitable food relief. We must examine the way food is subsidized, produced, processed, purchased, distributed, and consumed, and pay attention to how the food system affects the health of Earth, people and every other kind. Pursuing the subject of **Food, Farming and Faith** exposes the hard realities that corporate food producers and marketers operating

under government-approved agriculture policies often mistreat land, workers, animals, and consumers. Those policies also constrict the options of small farmers and destroy local community practices of self-sufficiency, forcing people to migrate to urban slums.

So what have mainline (Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic) churches and networks organized by progressive Christians, been doing in response, beyond providing emergency food aid and disaster relief? Let me point to several other basic aspects of creative, faithful engagement over recent decades by ecumenically cooperative denominations in the U.S.:

1. Educating about world hunger (including poverty and hunger in the U.S.) and significant ways to respond that reduce hunger and seek hunger justice. An early example was WHEAT (“World Hunger Education and Action Together”, a multi-denominational project convened by the NCC in the 1970s that I [DTH] chaired). It focused on causes of hunger **and priority areas of church engagement** (for which we raised church and foundation funds, trained regional leaders, and supported ecumenical efforts, etc.):

Education and Interpretation

Direct food relief (communal and homeless feeding, food pantries)

Influencing Public Food Policy

Appropriate Development Assistance

Farm Worker Rights

Lifestyle Integrity.

These have remained priority areas of mainline church engagement with hunger. A recent example is the resource entitled *JUST EATING? Practicing our Faith at the Table*, developed by Church World Service and the Presbyterian Hunger Program (available from PDS 1-800-524-2612). It encompasses the same emphases and also offers liturgical resources and points to available action handles plus links to partner organizations.

Which brings up an important question: **Why the shift from Combating Hunger to Just Eating** in the content sections of that resource? On the one hand, it could obscure a direct focus on taking action to reduce hunger or malnutrition. On the other hand, it melds self-regard with other-regard and it highlights our responsibility to foster a just and sustainable food system.

2. Faith-based Lobbying for Adequate Government Food Programs

BREAD for the World is a seasoned, ecumenical progressive Christian citizens’ network – a collective ecumenical voice for ending hunger at home

and abroad -- focused particularly on reshaping food policy and international development. It was started in the early 1970s by Lutheran pastor Art Simon, who often emphasized that one act of Congress has much more effect on people's food security than all of the churches' relief & food sharing projects. Too often, acts of Congress that follow the model of neo-liberal industrial agriculture actually increase the malnourishment of ordinary people and local communities, while further degrading land and water, on every continent. E.g., what each 5-year "Farm Bill" authorizes and the USDA then does (and doesn't do) makes a huge difference, as far-sighted church leaders in the U.S. have known ever since the Great Depression and Dust Bowl (when Protestant and Catholic rural life programs were initiated.)

To summarize, the hunger programs of mainline churches based in the U.S. have embodied eco-justice vision and values by sowing consistent concern for **food security**, school lunches, food stamps, WIC, family welfare, and keeping agriculture subsidies to big growers from wiping out small farmers everywhere. Recently, mainline churches have also shown strong support for **Fair Trade practices and Debt Relief** – communicating such advocacy in appropriate ways to corporate and political powers through Bread for the World and through regional or state-level nongovernmental organizations.

3. Supporting Self-development of People fostering sustainable agriculture at home and abroad. Mainline Church programs to combat hunger have consistently advocated policies to save rural communities and family farms, since scale correlates inversely with care for land and water. As Wendell Berry likes to say, "You can only care for as much land as you can walk." Therefore, the churches have welcomed LISA (Low Input Sustainable Agriculture), organic farming, and farmers markets. (Less use of energy, fertilizer or "killer" seeds, of course, cuts fossil fuel emissions and helps to reduce global warming, while strengthening family farms.)

The self-development emphasis of hunger action involves obtaining or leveraging special grants and bringing appropriate technology to grass roots organizations that work in poor communities to achieve some food security. E.g., the Presbyterian Hunger Program has been doing this in Eritrea, Bolivia, Bangladesh, & Puerto Rico. There is also the sterling record of an ecumenical NGO named "Agricultural Missions," and of agricultural development personnel fielded by some denominations, e.g., the United Methodist Church. There is a parallel need for such work inside the U.S.

E.g., in the state of Maine there is a New American Sustainable Agriculture Project that trains refugee farmers to operate in sustainable ways.

4. Advocating the Rights of Farm Workers. The churches continue to join in selective buying campaigns that challenge major food producing, processing and marketing corporations to improve the working conditions and income of their workers. Such involvement began with ecumenical support of the United Farm Workers lettuce and grape boycotts in the Sixties and Seventies. Currently, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) gets a lot of church and some university attention. Through several decades, the main religious instrumentality for advocacy of agriculture labor rights has been the National Farm Worker Ministry, along with affiliated state-level organizations that often focus on conditions facing migrant farm workers. Today, the Interfaith Worker Justice organization also adds a component of advocacy for labor rights of workers in meat processing plants,

5. Challenging church members and church-related institutions to change their food buying and consumption habits. Faith-based anti-hunger programs now emphasize that lifestyle integrity requires better food purchasing and consuming habits on the part of institutional food services as well as individual households. This can involve selective buying of locally-produced (often organically grown) food including free range chicken and beef, advocacy of fair wages for workers in the food system, and preference for fair-traded food products. In the purview of selective buyers **two emerging points of focus** for education and action are gaining prominence:

- a) **Supporting humane treatment of animals.** Small networks of laity are beginning to resist factory farming that intensely confines and mistreats food animals: chickens, hogs, calves, cattle in confined animal feeding operations. As yet, few denominations have adopted a strong policy against CAFOs (the United Methodists being a sterling exception). The lack of significant church programs to pursue animal welfare concerns, reminds us that: a) compared to the plight of human workers in poultry and hog operations, the mistreatment of animals in closely confined factory farming has received little attention; and b) we are not yet in a post-anthropocentric era. But humane aspects of sustainability should be added, carefully, to comprehensive programs of hunger action and ethical eating. The goal should be to enlarge the church's moral concern and action, not to displace current emphases.

b) Opposing production and use of bio-fuels that hurt Earth and the poor. Here I refer particularly to large-scale ethanol produced from corn, which has become quite problematic because: 1) the whole ethanol fuel production and transport cycle actually increases green house gas emissions, and 2) it puts upward pressure worldwide on prices of basic food commodities that are displaced by ethanol production. Higher prices for imported grains have devastating effects on poor countries that lack self-sufficiency in food production. (This is another gross example of the pattern that Art Simon alerted us to decades ago – one change in agricultural or energy policy can have dire effects that outstrip all of our direct food relief efforts.) The churches have yet to speak up clearly about the ambiguities of particular bio-fuels such as corn ethanol, and related agricultural production subsidies that undercut the poor, adding many millions of malnourished people to the world’s total – now more than a billion!

(One factor hampering justice-oriented responses by churches is that their governing bodies can be overly influenced by affluent members who are growers determined to protect their financial interests. I first experienced this as a young pastor chairing the Presbytery Church and Society Committee in Riverside County, CA. Our public forum on farm worker rights, featuring spokespersons for the Migrant Ministry and the Farm Bureau, was quickly corralled by vocal Elders from congregations in “grower” communities.)

Finally, let’s briefly attend to the third word in the title of this symposium by considering what mature **faith** can contribute to food sufficiency. We know the Creator / Liberator portrayed in the Bible to be passionate about the right to food as an expression of basic justice for all people and every other kind. Faith in this God impels us to do likewise – to act in ways that enable the poor and vulnerable to obtain sufficient food.

Our faith affirms that God loves the world and all therein including us. Within the divinely relished earth community, God actively loves each of us into being with and for others, instead of remaining preoccupied with ourselves. Since our personal salvation is taken care of by God-with-us, we are drawn by the faith relationship (before perceiving an ethical obligation) to think and act for the good of all. By seeking a just and sustainable food system, we actually participate in a wider distribution of God’s worldly love.