

Briefing 797

Faith and Food Conference – making the connections

Summary

Agriculture needs to be designed to feed the world by moving away from maximising profit and moving back to more traditional diets and labour intensive agriculture with the aid of science to aid productivity. The power of 'local' cannot be overestimated. Trade liberalisation has encouraged developing countries need large food imports because they have been encouraged to focus on one or two products. The Amazon feeds Europe but leaves its people hungry.

This briefing has been kindly prepared for RuSource by the Rev'd Caroline Pinchbeck, Rural Life Adviser for the Canterbury and Rochester dioceses. It summarises a conference held in Oxford on 28th February and organised by a group of Christians from in and around Oxford,

The day was divided into two sections. In the morning, there were two speakers whose focus was on the local perspective, and in the afternoon two speakers with a focus on the global perspective. There were also group workshops with a range of topics such as fair trade, farming and agriculture, bread poetry, worship etc. Over a hundred people attended and were able to have a good discussion both as a whole group, and in the smaller groups.

Speakers –

i) Colin Tudge (food writer) – Feeding people is easy

The current world population stands at 6.5 billion people and many pose the question that it is impossible to feed the world. The forecasters say that the population will reach 9 billion by 2050. However, if one thinks that it is not possible to feed the world this signals a moral lapse. The thesis presented here is that it is possible to feed the world, primarily through designing agriculture to expressly feed the world. This is achieved through two main ways that of polyculture, and through conceptual farming – arable, horticulture, and labour intensiveness.

Currently, the aim of agriculture is to maximise profit through finding the maximum turnover, value adding (packaging), and the cutting of costs. If we had a traditional diet we would not need so much food. If we look to the time when there are 9 billion people, the animals needed to feed this number would be eating the equivalent of food for 4 billion people. The effects of cost cutting through the cutting of labour has meant that less than one percent are now working full time on the land. In the United States there are more people in prison than on the land. If these statistics are compared to the third world, it is calculated that sixty percent of the population work on the land. However, this is being eroded away by our Government who are encouraging these countries to industrialise.

What are we going to do?

The answer is through the adoption of the 'new agrarianism' where the focus is put back firmly on agriculture. This would see much of the agriculture being done on small holdings and mixed farms. This would reintroduce farming as a craft, with the aid of science to assist productivity.

How do we get there?

This could not be achieved through big business, but rather through the people's movement. *This could be done through any of the following - reform, revolution and renaissance: but, renaissance is the most productive. A renaissance brings people together to form a critical mass while encouraging people to do things differently and create a new system in situ.*

Do you need a religious base to have morality?

The answer to the question may be in the negative. However, a religious base plays an important part if you want a robust morality, because it embeds morality in a bigger world view. Religion is an antidote to street materialism, which pervades our society and is the number one enemy of humanity. Religion enables people to focus on what is the proper response.

A Practical Note –

Landshare is a part of the campaign for enlightened agriculture. It three premises are to encourage modern farming, community involvement and a collective for enlightened agriculture. Landshare is at: <http://www.landshare.net/>

Tim Gorringe (St Luke's Professor of Theology at the University of Exeter) – Biblical Perspectives on Food and Farming

Through an exposition of Biblical texts the three themes of respect, justice, and thankfulness highlighted which the Christian faith promotes and can use as its foundation in the debate on food and farming.

The first text is Genesis Chapter 2 verse 15, where Adam (name meaning compost) demonstrates that human beings are intimately related to the earth, and as 'compost' shows that we come out of, and return to the earth. This was widened to include the themes of servanthood, the keeping of the commandments which culminate in the main theme of respect which lies at the heart of good farming practice, for without respect we cannot have proper agriculture.

The second text is Mark Chapter 6, the great feedings. The people were gathered in a desert place, hungry, and yet it is the boy who offers to share his food. This points us to the biblical concept of sharing through redistribution, a concept Israel understood as this was the basis of its economy. If we turn to Isaiah chapters 55, and 58, we see that making money is not the goal, but rather that the basic needs of all people are met. The theme of justice means a vision of the world where all people work cooperatively for the common good.

The third text is Mark Chapter 14 where Jesus says, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. The question is posed as to what is one meant to do. We see the answer in the account of the Emmaus story where the disciples (who do not fully understand Jesus' ministry) recognise him in the breaking of bread. Sharing food is at the heart of Christian practice, and along this with thankfulness. This should underlie food and farming practice, and should not be about grasping as much as possible and sole profit motive.

The fourth text is Deuteronomy Chapter 8, where the people are asked to remember how they were led out of the wilderness. This reminds us that we 'do not live by bread alone, but by every word'. This is a reminder that we cannot solve all the world's problems through technique and technology. As Christians for all that God makes we should be thankful for what we have been given, and how this can be transfigured. Christians should take food seriously.

In Acts 10, in the story of Peter at Cornelius' house his dream is about lobsters and suckling pig which are not allowed in Jewish law, and he is told don't call anything I have made unclean. Christianity has never had one sacred place, sacred architecture for it has been committed to the vernacular, committed

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to the local. The link between Acts chapters 2 and 10 is that the people understand the Gospel in their own language. There is not one sole system or cuisine that can be 'baptised'. Christianity embraces the local wherever it goes.

In conclusion, the power of the local cannot be underestimated, and that as Colin Tudge said it is through a renaissance that one can change the world view, and perspective about the value of local food.

Hungry for Change – Jan Simmonds (Christian Aid)

Some Facts –

- 900 million people not enough to eat
- 25,000 people a day die of malnutrition and hunger
- Every 5 minutes a child dies of hunger.

What are the causes?

Trade Liberalisation – the ways in which the trade markets encourage economic growth. The process of countries needing a large number of food imports because they have been encouraged to focus on one or two products. An example is Haiti where the market was opened in 1980, they received subsidies and rice prices have gone up, but now Haitians are starving.

Under investment – The under investment in the developing world is not helping these countries to do small things, an example a farmer given money to ensure he gets his produce to market.

Price of Oil – The impact of oil prices is felt more keenly on those in poorer countries than those in richer ones. The climate change debate needs to be more focused on where appropriate actions can take place. There is too much uncertainty.

Population and Urbanisation – The question of the cause and effect of people moving from rural areas to the cities, and the impact this was having on increasing the poverty of people as they had to find homes, work and food.

What does it mean?

There is a need to recognise that hunger is another symptom of the massive injustice of severe poverty in our world today. There is little or no education available, the people have few rights, which lays them open to exploitation. There is a need to focus on people's needs rather than profits.

The Growth of Fair Trade –

The growth of the fair trade movement is beginning to enable people to have a livelihood, and an enormous number are benefiting from it. We need to remind ourselves that the boy in the account of the feeding of the five thousand could have put his food out to market, kept it to himself; instead he shared his loaves and fishes and there was still some leftover.

The Amazon feeds Europe but leaves its people hungry – Father Edilberto Sena (Roman Catholic Priest, Campaigner against the destruction of the Amazon)

Fr Edilberto shared with the conference his personal experience of ministering to the people in the Amazon. He saw his role as being a provocateur of the people, and enabling the people to see ways in which Jesus was walking alongside them in the lives. He sought comfort in the phrase; I will be with you to the end of time.

He spoke of how the mineral and timber companies are invading the Amazon and are rapidly raiding the area of its trees. He stated that 96, 000 kilometres square have been taken down in 8 years, and that seventy percent of logs have been exported to the United States illegally as they are not properly certified. He added that the Federal State is not working for the economic good of the country by allowing the exploitation of the Amazon by the taking of its natural resources such as iron and gold.

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Fr Edilberto spoke of how the indifference of the indigenous population, as they do not believe that the Amazon will dry up. Recently there was a big drought in the Amazon which is the first time in sixty years. It was not an accident of nature, but had been provoked by the companies working in the region.

He saw his task as working with small groups of people in the locality to help them be strong against the large companies. He aired his frustration that the small groups were fighting amongst themselves which was weakening their cause. The people need to adopt the role of David in the story of David and Goliath.

Rev'd Caroline Pinchbeck, March 26, 2009

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