

Food Security and Faith

Rev. Carol Devine, Green Chalice

August 2015

Genesis – *the LORD God formed man from the dust (or soil) of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God **planted a garden** in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food..., The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’*

We were made from the soil, put in the garden to live and eat and work, and when we die, we return to that same soil.

We Disciples are called “**People of the Table.**” The Lord’s Table is located in the center of our sanctuaries. It is the climax of our worship services. It is how we define ourselves. It connects us to each other – to all Christians from all times. It connects us to the earth through grain and fruit. It connects us to Jesus who died on the cross and to Christ who triumphed over death. Everything we do – every decision we make should be influenced by our faith in Christ Jesus. But since we are people of the Table – Food – what we eat, how we eat, where we eat, and feeding others should be central to how we live out our faith.

And unfortunately, decisions around food are NOT simple. Our food system is NOT simple – it is very complicated and sinful. If I were to purchase a hamburger from a fast food restaurant, I can be sure that cow spent all or most of its life on concrete eating Genetically Modified Corn in cramped conditions away from wind, sun, rain and grass. The concentration of thousands and thousands of animals emits a lot of methane gas – adding to global climate change. Their waste has to be dealt with, and after slaughter, so do their remains. The bun would most likely have high fructose corn syrup, which besides being bad for me is also made from GMO corn with pesticides, some of which end up in the creeks and streams, in the water for those who live around the farms and in the air. The wheat for the bun would be GMO as well. The tomato might have been raised and harvested by enslaved people living in conditions unfit for our pets. The parts that make up my hamburger would have traveled, on average, 1500 miles, adding to air pollution and contributing to global warming.

Holy Eating = eating that supports: healthy soil, water, and air, which supports biodiversity on our planet; humane and ethical treatment of animals; and fair wages and good working conditions for people – AND that is nutritious and delicious.

In Luke 1 Mary praised God after Elizabeth blessed her pregnancy with Jesus, and she imagines the world God would bring through her son when she said,

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

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He has *filled* the hungry with *good things* – the Magnificat gives us a vision of equality and justice where the hungry are full – not with empty calories, but with *good things*.

We are to feed those who are hungry with good food.

Since 2006, the label “hungry” is “Food Insecure,” to describe any household where, sometime during the previous year, people didn’t have enough food to eat. Instead of looking at physical attributes of malnourishment with stunted growth and low weight, the questions have become:

Have you missed meals in the past year, worried about running out of food, or gone to bed hungry?

The World Food Summit of 1996 defined *food security* as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food (hear “good food”) to maintain a healthy and active life.”

Food Security includes: **physical** and **economic** access to food – which means that there is a grocery store, and you can either walk to it or have reliable transportation to get there, and then you have the money to purchase it. Food Security also means that food meets people’s **dietary needs** as well as their **food preferences** AND they have the **knowledge** to design a healthy diet and **ability to prepare** nutritious food.

Our goal as Followers of Christ is good food for the hungry, which requires:

All people need supermarkets and gardens located where they can easily get to them. Anyone who has driven through or lived in or near low-income neighborhoods in any city has witnessed the lack of trees and flowers and green spaces but also supermarkets, farmer’s markets, sit-down restaurants or gardens. The people who live in areas without good food options near them also do not have reliable transportation. The groceries that are in low-income neighborhoods are a lot more expensive, and they do not carry fresh foods. This is what we call food deserts, and food deserts are an example of **Environmental Racism**. As you all venture out to your various sites – look for signs of environmental racism. I co-authored a resolution on this subject, which passed at our GA this summer, that calls for the Church to become educated on Environmental Racism and to take a stand. Food deserts are one important example of it. Low-income families who live in very rural areas also lack access to supermarkets and often reliable transportation.

All people need money or some way to pay for good food. We cannot be satisfied with low-income people having bellies full of bad “food-like” products. Honey bun snack foods might satisfy a child’s hunger, but there is nothing in it besides calories that support that child’s physical, mental, cognitive or spiritual growth. When we eat healthy foods, we have more energy, we have better concentration, we are less likely to get sick, and we all around feel better.

All people need access to food that supports their dietary needs – for good physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development as they grow. Eating chicken nuggets and fries night after night is not good for our bodies and spirits. All of us need food that we are not allergic to – i.e. peanuts – considering gluten sensitivity or diabetes or heart health or high cholesterol, etc.

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All of us deserve access to food that we like to prepare and to eat. What we eat reflects our connection to our culture, our heritage, our family – it's how we feel connected to others and to God.

All people need to have the knowledge of how to shop for food, how to select healthy foods, and build a diet for themselves and their families. In generations past, children grew up in the kitchen with their mothers and grandmothers, and they learned how to build healthy and nutritious meals. Today, we are all so busy that we do not have the time or energy to prepare meals. People have grown up without the skills they need to feed themselves or their families in a healthy way.

All people need to have the equipment to prepare the food – skillet and pans, stove and oven.

Summary: We all need **physical** and **economic** access to food that meets our **dietary needs** and **food preferences**. We all require the **knowledge** and **ability to prepare** nutritious food.

Most of our churches have a feeding program of some sort?
Food bank, meals, backpack program, garden?

STATS:

- In 1980, there were a few hundred emergency food programs across the country; today there are more than 50,000.
- 870 million people around the world do not have access to a sufficient supply of nutritious and safe foods.
- 14.3 percent of U.S. households or 49.1 million people in the U.S. are food insecure.
- Missouri's rate is higher than the nation's at 16.8 percent.
- People with severe food insecurity have healthcare costs more than twice as high as people who are food secure.

THINGS THAT HAVE CHANGED:

- Today, people who are food insecure are almost always **employed**, a big change since the 1960s. But minimum wage today does not have the purchasing power it used to. \$1.60 in 1968 adjusted for inflation would be \$10.94 an hour today.
- Another change is that, today, people who are food insecure are often **obese**. Hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin. People make trade-offs and purchase cheap food that's filling but not nutritious. The extra pounds that result from a poor diet are collateral damage of hunger.

It is possible to eat well cheaply in the U.S. but it takes **resources and knowledge** that many low-income people do not have. Food in pantries are often high in salt, sugar, and fat. Fast foods and processed foods are cheap! When low-income people have money for food, they often go for what's convenient, just as we do.

I have a friend whose husband was in seminary full-time and worked part-time. They had two young children, and daycare was not an option for them. They needed to live as cheaply as possible. And so my friend ended up feeding her family on what they would have been able to collect in SNAP payments.

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But my friend has a degree from Cornell; they own their own home, and a car; she served in the Peace Corps and so had experience eating cheaply; and she worked part-time, so she had time. She turned her tiny back yard into a garden. She canned and froze food. She cut coupons and paid attention to food sales. She learned where she could get certain foods cheaply – like day-old bread. Eating cheaply and healthy IS possible when you have the knowledge, access to soil, a kitchen, a vehicle, and a lot of time.

Our expectations of costs associated with food have also changed. In 1950, average people in the U.S. spent over 30 percent of their income on food, and the farmer received over 50 cents of every dollar. By the year 2000, we spent about 10 percent of our income on eating, and farmers now get less than 20 cents of every dollar – many have gone out of business.

The Influence of the U.S. Government:

In 2012, the government spent roughly \$11 billion to subsidize and insure commodity crops like corn and soy, with Iowa among the states receiving the highest subsidies. The government spent about \$1.6 billion for “specialty crops,” the label given to fruits and vegetables that its own nutrition guidelines say should make up half the food on our plates.

These priorities are reflected at our grocery stores, where the price of fresh food is high, while the cost of empty calorie foods like honey buns and soda is cheap. Since 1980, the *real* cost of fruits and vegetables has increased by 24 percent and the cost of beverages, sweetened with corn syrup—has dropped by 27 percent.

Subsidized corn is used for biofuel, corn syrup, and, mixed with soybeans, for animal feed. Subsidies reduce crop prices AND supports the abundance of processed foods, which are more affordable but less nutritious. *Across income brackets, processed foods make up a large part of the U.S. diet.* Of the 10 foods that make up the caloric intake for low-income individuals, sugary drinks like soda are #1.

A friend of mine had a child born with a condition with the side-effect of seizures. For the first part of her life, her daughter was on anti-seizure medications, but the meds made her like a zombie and she was cognitively behind for her age. My friend wanted to get her daughter off those meds and she started with her diet. She eliminated all food-like items that had ingredients not created by God – no foods with MSG or high-fructose corn syrup or added colors or added “natural flavors” or preservatives. She did her best to eliminate GMOs. They started a backyard garden; they got chickens for eggs; they bought from farmers markets and groceries that carry local foods. Their meats are all local, their cheeses and pastas and breads and most of their sauces are now local. And Caroline stopped having seizures – she came off the meds and a sparkle came to her eyes – it was like she awoke from a deep sleep. She is now on grade level or ahead in school.

I was a teacher for years, and I know from experience that food affects how children behave and whether or not they can pay attention. It affects their health and their attitudes.

Corn and Corn Subsidies: In 1994, NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) was passed and opened the door for easy trade with our neighbors. BUT for 10,000 years, the people of Mexico fed themselves on a corn-based diet. Farmers cultivated hundreds of types of corn – of all colors and flavors.

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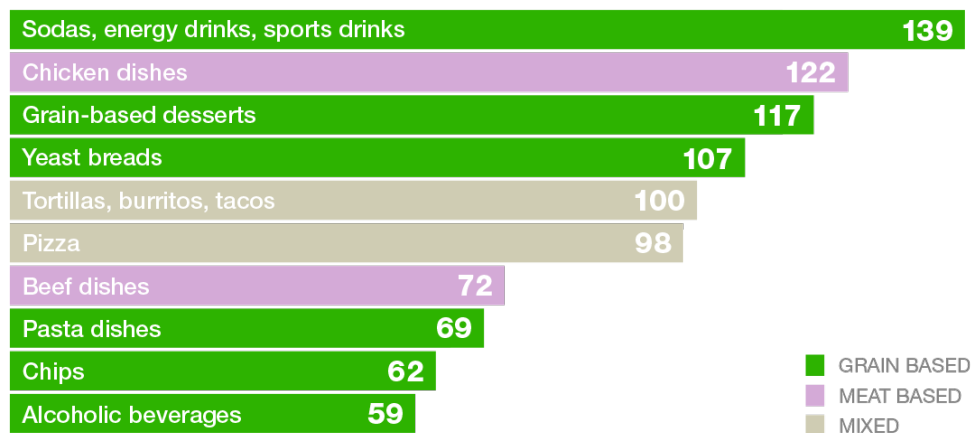
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Since NAFTA, Mexico's annual per capita growth has averaged 1.2 percent per year – the lowest in our hemisphere. As our heavily subsidized corn has poured into Mexico, small farmers and corn businesses have gone out of business. 2 million Mexican farmers have left the farm, while the U.S. now controls 70 percent of the world corn market. 20 million Mexicans live in food poverty. 25 percent are severely food insecure and 20 percent (1 in 5) of the children in Mexico are malnourished. Jobless Mexicans come to the U.S. at a rate of 500,000 a year in large part due directly or indirectly to corn – and we respond by building a wall. Our food system is complicated!

Top ten sources of calories for low-income individuals

Age two and older, per person per day



Food Waste: The rate of increase of agricultural production has exceeded the rate of population growth by 30 percent in recent decades. One-third of the food produced for human consumption is wasted, about 1.3 billion tons. Waste happens at all stages in the food cycle – production, harvest, handling, storage, processing and distribution – but MOST of the waste happens at the consumer level.

Climate Change: *Agriculture is a major contributor to climate change* through carbon released through pesticides which are petroleum based, through transportation and through methane from animals. Some estimate that agriculture is directly responsible for 14 percent of human-made greenhouse gas emissions. If carbon dioxide produced by deforestation used to expand areas for cultivation or pasture is included, then agriculture may be responsible for up to 30 percent of greenhouse gasses. Food transported long distances requires processing, lots of chemical treatment, refrigeration and packaging that all contribute to pollution, diseases and climate change. All of this packaging ends up as mountains of garbage near or in our cities. Greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide from “food miles” and methane from garbage dumps are contributing to climate change and destabilizing the planet.

Climate change also effects food production. Places that used to be fertile for food production are now deserts (Africa and Lake Chad). California is our largest food-producing state, and they are in a six-year drought that is affecting the price of crops and what is able to be grown.

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Wild fish and seafood have been negatively affected by climate change. Ocean fish are shifting towards the poles where it is cooler, and fisheries associated with coral reefs are in decline. Sea level rise, polar ice melting, changes in precipitation, and ocean acidification all are likely to disrupt wild fish populations and their associated fisheries. Harmful algal blooms are more prevalent, and they either affect shellfish directly or render them improper for consumption.

On land, scientists are documenting important damage to crops during extreme heat events, which are becoming more prevalent. In my state of Kentucky, we have had so much rain this growing season that many crops have literally drowned. Weeds are benefiting from increased carbon dioxide concentrations, making them more competitive against crops. In addition, warmer temperatures help pests survive and expand their geographic range. And there's been a documented decline in herbicide efficacy with increased carbon dioxide levels. Food transportation and distribution can be impacted by floods and other climate-related disasters. Food storage will face increased populations of pests.

Water: All Food requires Water, especially animals.

Agriculture and utility plants are the biggest users of water. Food processing often needs large amounts of potable water. Tap water has tested positive for herbicides and pesticides in many cities across the United States' Corn Belt. The second United Nations World Water Development Report says:

- More than a billion people on earth lack access to safe drinking water
- "90% of the 30,000 deaths that occur every week from unsafe water and unhygienic living conditions are of children under five years old."
- Water security—in light of climate change, population growth, and agricultural pressures on supplies—is in jeopardy across the globe. 47 percent of the world's population could be living under severe water stress by 2050. Reducing food waste and improving distribution of food can make a huge difference in relieving pressure on freshwater sources.
- Droughts represent society's new normal, lasting for years and contributing to the depletion of groundwater and underground water reservoirs. (i.e. California)
- Algal blooms (HABs), occurring in freshwater and marine environments, are often caused by runoff from the petroleum-based fertilizers can negatively affect the health of people and marine animals and organisms.

GMOs – Genetically Modified Organisms: Scary Stuff! GMOs are not the best science and technology for food production and survival of people, the soil or biodiversity. Monsanto: 40 percent of U.S. crops are Monsanto plants (80 percent corn and 93 percent soy). Monsanto, which created and owns Round Up, OWNS 1,676 seed patents. They have sued farmers over seeds! Their genetically modified seeds are affecting diversity of plants.

SOLUTIONS

As we turn now toward solutions to these complex problems, I want us to think back for a moment of the food system our grandparents lived with. They ate good food; there were neighborhood groceries with good food. They had gardens or access to farmer's stands. They knew how to prepare it and could eat well cheaply. It has taken a short time to get us into this mess. As we look to 2050, when we'll need to feed two billion more people in the world – all these issues will worsen unless we all work to change the food system, unless we change the model. **And the Church should be at the front of that change.**

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How can WE and our churches be part of the solution?

- Read Luke 24:36-43
- If we believe that any of the food we purchase might be served to the risen Christ; if we believe that any of the food we give away in our food pantries or serve at our soup kitchens might be fed to Christ, how would that change how we feed ourselves and others?
- Group Work: Taking into account everything that we have talked about today, what can we do as individual Disciples of Christ and as Christ's body, the Church, to address the food situation in which we find ourselves today?

SOME things churches are doing now:

- Supplement food pantry with food from garden – Providence CC in KY
- Community gardens – FCC Owensboro started garden plots for refugees in their neighborhood
- Host farmer's market at the church – Beargrass CC, Louisville, KY won a city award for market
- Gleaning – Midway CC in KY
- Local Meals for community meals – FCC, Frankfort, KY
- Greenstock Festival with only local foods and zero waste
- Seeding saving and canning classes at Woodland CC Lexington, KY
- Heirloom seed and plant sale – yearly tradition at Woodland CC, Lexington, KY
- Seedleaf – organization that grew from God calling one Christian to feed the hungry, started numerous community gardens – in food desert areas of Lexington, KY. They teach the children in nearby schools how to raise food AND how to cook it.
- Chickens – FCC Arlington, TX has community gardens, including fruit trees and grapes, and raises chickens for eggs – all goes to food pantry

Ideas from the Groups:

- Community gardens
- Cooking classes
- Committing to fair trade coffee and local food
- Financial management classes
- Allowing families to use the church kitchen
- Educating congregation on need for "good food" for pantries
- Working on the whole problem of poverty – jobs, housing, etc.

Organic Foods

- Healthy organic agriculture system can significantly reduce carbon dioxide and help slow climate change.
- Organic farming approaches for major crops, such as corn and soybeans, use an average of 30 percent less fossil energy, and at the same time conserve more water in the soil.
- Organic farming not only protects water from harmful chemicals, but organic farmers amend soil correctly, and using less evasive farming practices such as buffer strips and cover crops, which help indirectly conserve water resources.

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- Organic food is free of toxic chemicals that destroy soil health as well as our health. When you eat organic food, you take care of your own health and the health of the planet. Healthy soil is the most effective way of removing carbon and nitrogen from the atmosphere and undoing the climate damage caused by petrochemicals used in chemical agriculture.
- Rodale research notes: “If 10,000 medium sized farms in the U.S. converted to organic production, they would store so much carbon in the soil that it would be equivalent to taking 1,174,400 cars off the road.”

Local

Eating local and creating a sustainable and healthy foodshed for your city means reducing food miles and toxics in the food chain. Eating local means we are connecting directly with our farmers and helping them shift to agriculture that allows them to grow biodiverse, safe, healthy food that we can access.

Rebuilding the broken food system, its ecological cycles and the broken links between the city and the countryside means creating *food-smart citizens* who know what they are eating and where their food comes from and how to prepare it. Rejuvenate your health and that of your brothers and sisters while rejuvenating the agricultural economy and the earth.

Wendell Berry calls us to “Eat Responsibly” (with Carol’s additions):

- Grow food to the extent that you are able (and support pollinators like bees and compost your food waste to build up the soil)
- Prepare your own food as much as you can (avoid fast food, eat less meat)
- Learn the origins of the food you buy, and eat food produced closest to your home
- Buy from the farmer when you can
- Learn the economy and technology of industrial food production
- Learn what it takes to grow *good* food

GOOD NEWS:

It has taken us a very short time to get into this mess. We, people of the table, can journey with God and lead the way to the solution. We can put farmers back on the land here in the U.S. AND in Mexico and Central America. We can improve our health and the health of our brothers and sisters. We can repair the earth. We can grow closer to our Lord and celebrate communion every time we eat.

May it be so!