



## Church of Scotland Church and Society Council

### Sustainable Agriculture: What can congregations contribute?

Report from the conference, 10 February 2011

#### Background

In 2002 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland considered a report on sustainable agriculture and agreed two deliverances:

- To affirm the importance of moving to more sustainable forms of agriculture, including both integrated and organic farming systems, and to urge HMG to provide more incentives and assistance for farmers to do so.
- To urge Her Majesty's Government to submit the health and nutritional claims of organic agriculture to independent scientific research and evaluation.

The full report to the General Assembly is available at:

[http://www.srtp.org.uk/srtp/view\\_article/sustainable\\_agriculture\\_report\\_2002](http://www.srtp.org.uk/srtp/view_article/sustainable_agriculture_report_2002).

Food and agriculture remains a subject of ongoing interest and importance. The Church and Society Council is preparing a report for the General Assembly in 2012 and in February 2011 invited a range of experts to a conference to help it explore these concerns and learn more about the issues. The purpose of the conference was not to provide firm answers but to help shape the thinking of the Council in preparing the report. In particular the Council is interested to explore the question 'What can congregations do?' This report briefly summarises the conference and its conclusions.

#### Keynote address "Sustainable Agriculture: What can congregations contribute?" David Atkinson, ACTS Rural Group

*Why should the church be interested in Farming and Food production?*

- Scripture: "God said, Throughout the earth I shall give you all the plants which bear seed, they shall be yours for food." (Gen,1:29). The bible contains a wealth of references to food and agriculture. Its language and content repeatedly reassert the spiritual importance of food and agriculture for Christian life.
- Food is not just another commodity to be bought and sold without thought, it should be at the heart of communal life.
- The price of food should not be determined by unrelated commodity markets or the production of biofuels.
- In Scotland geography limits what we can produce but we could produce more food of greater variety than at present. Climate change and an emphasis on local production should help.

The Church of Scotland has been involved in these discussions for some time and in its support of Fair Trade demonstrates what can be done.

*What are the key issues today?*

- Rising global population – now 7 billion and likely to rise to 9 billion this century
- Climate change – which offers opportunities and threats for agriculture
- Resources: Water and Energy availability will become global issues this century
- Food security: in a global food economy national and personal food security will be important political issues
- The value and appropriateness of new technologies. GM crops provide an example (see box)

*GM: Not a disaster but not a silver bullet either*

- The performance of GM crops has varied greatly between farms, farmers, crop varieties, regions, seasons.
- Institutional factors have a major impact.
- Poor farmers have generally not done well from GM.
- It isn't the silver bullet some hoped for: concepts such as nitrogen fixing cereals remain very uncertain.
- Some multinational companies 'own' and control some GM crops

*What can we do? Is there a role for the individual church member?*

- Advocacy: congregations can be concerned, get involved and seek to influence debate on a range of issues such as food and waste, health and diet issues, government subsidy
- Leadership: churches can set an example
- Witness: be aware of the issues and challenges
- Use of our purchasing power. There are alternatives to food shopping in supermarkets "We have more power as consumers than as citizens!" and can help promote and diversify Scottish sources of food.
- Voluntary action and partnership – congregations can help make links between farmers and consumers

### **Discussion Groups**

Five discussion groups considered specific themes in more detail. Each was asked to identify one action for congregations and one action for the Church of Scotland to consider.

#### ***Our Mutual Food: Pete Ritchie, Whitmuir Farm***

- Supermarkets dominate the retail trade and mediate our relationship to producers but there are alternative models of food production and sale. Whitmuir Farm has developed a network of local farm supporters who provide regular financial support in return for produce. The report 'Our Mutual Food' suggests local consortia linking food production to local communities. The report is available at: <http://www.whitmuirorganics.co.uk/documents/ourmutualfoodreport.pdf>.

*Can congregations help to lead local food projects?*

*Can the Church of Scotland help congregations to think more about food and sharing?*

***Science and agriculture - new technologies, new opportunities, new challenges: Donald Bruce, Edinethics***

There are a variety of new technologies that have implications for food and agriculture. These include GM crops and the development of nano technology for food processing and packaging. Biofuels, which have been criticised for diverting land away from food production may be advantageous in certain circumstances.

*Congregations should be concerned about their food, where it comes from and what its production involves.*

*The Church of Scotland should encourage Eco-Congregation Scotland to develop a module on food, demonstrating how food links environmental issues to everyday life.*

***Community supported agriculture: local food production, transition towns, allotments: Richard Frazer and Josiah Lockhart, Grassmarket Community Project***

Introduced the 'Plough to plate' project at Greyfriars Kirk, bringing food from local producers to provide meals at the Grassmarket community project. Food poverty is not just limited to the poor; there is a widespread lack of understanding of food and a poor diet is widespread across Scotland. There is a sacred dimension: we should cherish agriculture and be aware of its biblical importance. Fair trade can we encourage sharing; and the development of food co-ops and community involvement in agriculture is a good way to take this forward.

*Congregations should support local food production: can they use glebe land to grow food?*

*The Church of Scotland should consider how it can support congregations in growing their own food and in developing links with local producers.*

***The view from the farm: issues and challenges facing farmers: John Picken, NFU Scotland***

The Scottish farming community is pragmatic, resourceful and resilient but heavily dependent on subsidy. There have been big changes in farming practices leading to a loss of rural employment; farms are often now run with a small number of permanent employees with much work subcontracted. Education and information are important and a monthly bulletin on the farming calendar for churches would be worth investigating.

*Can congregations help care for farmers in the community and work through advocacy and other means to keep rural communities sustainable?*

*Can the Church of Scotland lead advocacy at a national level?*

***The view from the Scottish Government: Antje Branding, Scottish Government***

The Scottish Government is heavily involved in promoting sustainable agriculture including 'A Vision for Scottish Agriculture', a food and drink policy and new guidance for the public sector on procurement to promote a sustainable agriculture. There were concerns about the failure of the market as a mechanism to promote sustainable agriculture; with evidence that it leads to poor outcomes both for the environment and rural communities. Food and agriculture education needs to be improved: how and what do children learn about food?

*Can congregations learn about food through the eco-congregation programme?*

*Can the Church of Scotland support and encourage sustainable purchasing guidance?*

**Plenary**

In discussion a number of themes emerged:

*Seasonality and locality*

The ACTS website has information on the farming calendar as does the NFU website that could this be shared more widely. Congregations could use church land to promote food growing or allotments and can support farmers in Scotland through 'community supported agriculture'.

### *Education*

Steps to help raise awareness of agriculture, food and cookery in both its practical and spiritual aspects would be very helpful. Learning about food is a way to learn about a range of issues including climate change. There is a role for Eco-Congregation Scotland here.

### *Changing lifestyles, changing lives*

Rediscovering and sharing the abundance of nature through growing food or buying locally makes both practical sense and is spiritually renewing.

### *The interdependence of town and country*

Congregations in cities depend on food from agriculture so this is not just a rural issue. The Church of Scotland should promote closer links between congregations and farmers to help them to both recognise and understand each other.

*The Church and Society Council is going to consider these issues and recommendations and will prepare a report with deliverances for the General Assembly 2012. For further information contact:*

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