

Church Networks Host Exploration of Bioethics

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By Debra Figeuth

The issues surrounding biotechnology are so complex and are changing so rapidly that it is difficult to keep up with them, according to participants in a one-day consultation subtitled "Christian perspectives on biotechnology." The event was hosted in First Presbyterian Church in downtown Winnipeg.

In spite of the complexity, a broad spectrum of people in Canada's churches are determined to find their bearings and develop a thoughtful, faithful stance towards this scientific revolution that is being driven at the speed of global investment patterns.

Christians in Canada will need good resources as they seek for points of reference around biotechnology, say the planners of the Winnipeg event. According to Peter Noteboom, Associate Secretary for Justice and Peace with the Canadian Council of Churches, the Council and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada are collaborating in a search for people who can help shape resources church people can use in this crucial emerging conversation.

Everything from genetically modified foods to reproductive technology came under scrutiny during the November 4 forum, sponsored by the Biotechnology Reference Group of the Canadian Council of Churches. As CCC general secretary Janet Somerville observed, discussion of the issues from a faith-based perspective can most fruitfully happen across traditional denominational lines. The issues, Somerville adds wryly, "are so new we don't disagree on them yet!"

An Inter-Connected Perspective

"Should pigs fly?" was the whimsical title given to the consultation, which featured a range of speakers from scientists and farmers to ethicists and philosophers. "The question isn't 'Could pigs fly?'" pointed out local organizer, Dr. Peter Denton. "The question, rather, is 'Should they fly?'"

What is possible isn't necessarily the same as what is right or what is needed: that basic insight formed the framework for much of the day's discussion. As Father Lawrence Demong, a Benedictine monk from Saskatoon, put it, knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing. We can be technological experts but moral pygmies.

The day opened with a time of worship led by Rev. Stan McKay, former moderator of the United Church of Canada, who pointed out that any talk about biotechnology is "in part, about

truth-telling." Decision-making is often in the hands of a few, he noted, with much of the population remaining unaware of what is even happening.

That theme emerged a number of times throughout the day, and with it the questions, Who has the power to make decisions? Who gives them that power? How can people in the faith community have a voice?

McKay also pointed out how important it is to recognize the inter-connectedness of faithfulness, wisdom and justice, and their grounding in creation. Denton, an ordained Presbyterian minister who teaches at the University of Winnipeg, reiterated that point when he explained how nothing in science or technology happens in a vacuum.

Three systems interconnect to constitute biotechnology, he said: biological, technological and belief systems. "What we do is riddled with values," he maintained. "(Our values tell us) what is good and bad, what is important or unimportant."

Denton also said it is unhelpful to look at biotechnology in terms of polarities. Neither "cheerleading" for biotechnology nor the "wholesale rejection" of it are helpful.

From a Christian perspective, he said, the most important contribution to the dialogue "is to change the direction of the burden of proof to show that changes are necessary before they become irreversible."

Dr. George Webster, a clinical ethicist at St. Boniface Hospital, described the "moral landscape" from which ethical decisions are made. Questions such as, "Who am I to you and who are you to me?" and "What kind of world do we want to live in?" are at the heart of the discussion on biotechnology, he said.

"If we only think about moral questions in terms of puzzles then it requires no engagement of ourselves," he said. "If we think about ethics as about relationships, the kind of people we are to each other, then it engages us at a different level."

Webster advocated preparing people in the Christian community who are knowledgeable and trained to think about ethical issues, as well as putting resources into the discussion. He also suggested the church has not always been open to discussing issues. "We've made it unsafe to engage in free and honest discussion," he said. "If we don't do that inside our communities, we don't have a prayer in engaging the public."

Denton and Webster made their presentations as part of a panel giving an overview of the range of biotechnological issues. A third panelist, Bruce Clemenger, director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Centre for Faith and Public Life in Ottawa, offered several biblical principles for approaching the issues.

Quoting from an EFC paper called "Changing Genes," Clemenger pointed out that God is

sovereign and the creator of all things; human beings are appointed as stewards of creation rather than owners.

Life is a gift to be cherished, he added. "There's no such thing as a useless life, because our worth is not determined by what we can do or accomplish, or even by the pleasure we experience; but rather by who we are in relation to God and each other."

Biblical theology is a theology of hope, Clemenger said. But hope is not always about a cure, nor does hope guarantee that a Christian living with a genetic disease will be cured of that disease.

Few genetic abnormalities can be corrected prenatally, Clemenger noted. When diseases are detected before birth, the option offered by today's conventional wisdom is abortion. Clemenger concluded that technology is not neutral. "Technology turns the world, including us, into raw materials," he said, citing the late Canadian philosopher George Grant. How, he wondered, can the social use of new technologies be governed according to a shared understanding of justice?

Agriculture and Biotechnology

The consultation's afternoon panel focused on agriculture and biotechnology. Leo Kurtenbach, an 81-year-old farmer from Saskatchewan, spoke from the experience of decades spent in farming, including 30 years in the hog business and the last 15 in grain farming. In the 1950s, he recalled, "we heard about the 'green revolution' to feed all the hungry in the world."

But today, in spite of farmers producing more food than they used to, "we still have millions of people around the world going hungry." Recently he heard the statement that if biotechnology was used to the fullest, the hungry of the world would be fed. "We've heard it all before," he said.

Kurtenbach worries that a few corporations have too much ownership and power over chemicals, fertilizers and seed. Costs to farmers are higher and income is less predictable. He recommends a publicly monitored system for biotech food rather than allowing the industry to monitor itself, as well as mandatory labeling for GM foods.

"We have to look at who would be responsible if something goes wrong," he insisted.

Plant scientist Anita Brulé-Babel of the University of Manitoba pointed out some of the positive applications of genetic technology, such as the production of pharmaceuticals and food

processing agents, where a biological organism "is used as a factory."

"Personally I don't really believe there's a problem moving genes from one species to another," she said, pointing out that much of the genetic code human beings carry is common across numerous other organisms.

The gene in itself is "just a gene," she added. Without being part of a whole, it is nothing. Brulé-Babel added later, however, that she is less comfortable with the notion of moving genes from one animal species to another than she is moving them among plant species.

Her view on genes raised questions about the nature of being. The view that genes are the building blocks of life is a materialist one, said Denton. In reality, he said, "The whole is far more than the sum of its parts. It's a problem of philosophical perspective."

Participant Stephen Rempel was also concerned about the genetic view. "If we're similar (to other organisms) in genetic structure," he asked, "what does that mean for our spirituality?"

Besides being a university-based teacher and researcher who "loves the science", Brulé-Babel also brings to the issues her perspectives as a Christian and as a mother, along with her memories of growing-up years on a mixed farm. The scientific sub-culture, she noted, rarely gives opportunities to probe the philosophical questions behind what is technologically possible. "We have to be very vigilant to make sure we are asking the right questions," she said. "We cannot implement this technology without this discussion."

The concept of patenting genes, for example, is a troubling one because it restricts the use of certain gene sequences and prevents people in poor countries from taking advantage of them. "Who gives companies the right to patent this technology in the first place?" she asked.

"The government and lawmakers gave them the right. In my mind they gave them a right they had no right to give in the first place." She challenged the Christian community not to accept that status quo. Because so much power is in the hands of large corporations, she added, "farmers have lost the right to save their seed for the next year's crop."

Genetics alone won't save the world's hungry, Brulé-Babel concluded, and those who want to help the hungry must take a broader approach. For example, "golden rice" has been lionized as a way of providing more nutrients to people who rely on rice as their staple food because it is enhanced with Vitamin A. But a bigger question should be asked, Brulé-Babel said: "Why do these people only have rice to eat in the first place?"

The day concluded with a summary and analysis by Rev. Eric Beresford, ethics and technology consultant to the Anglican Church of Canada, who pointed out that the phenomenon of biotechnology "has such power and significance that it can make the Industrial Revolution look like a Sunday school picnic."

The technologies, taken together, are far more powerful than any of them individually, he noted.

Beresford suggested there should be more emphasis in the discussion on how technologies affect communities and relationships, "because the nature of our lives is in community." Religions have much to say about relationships and living as part of a community, he commented.

One of the themes he heard emerging throughout the day was the need to "recover hope rather than hubris." Beresford suggested gaining wisdom from looking at the most vulnerable in society rather than viewing society from the top down. "There's a lot of hope, from my point of view, there."

Regarding the issues relating to agriculture, Beresford underscored the point that the problem "is not production but distribution. The question which I find myself asking again and again is how will the ownership affect the distribution of food?"

Noting that basing a claim of ownership on a particular definition of "discovery" is an idea at least as old as the expansion of European power into the Americas in the 16th century, Beresford wondered what would be the future of this new wave of claims that genes and natural sequences can be privately owned. Where does the challenge go from here?

Beresford suggested making use of the resources that are available within the Christian tradition, including the presence to each other of Christians who gather in churches each week. "It's a power base that we fail to recognize," he said.

"Should Pigs Fly?" was the second in what the Canadian Council of Churches hopes will be a series of seven consultations in different regions of Canada over the next couple of years. The first took place in November 1999 in Toronto. The gatherings are, in part, "talent hunts"—a search for Christian thinkers who can help churches develop reliable, ethically sound resources in the challenging area of bioethics today.

The Council's goal for the gatherings, according to General Secretary Janet Somerville, is "to nurture a long-range, broadly ecumenical conversation that can help Christians orient themselves and find their voice as Canadian society meets the offspring that will emerge from the marriage of biotechnology with restless global capital."