

# Gifts of the Earth Forum

St. Benedict's Monastery Winnipeg, Canada, November 3/4, 2000

## INTRODUCTION

Gifts of the Earth, an ecumenical forum held in Winnipeg, November 3-4, brought together 40 participants including farmers, theologians, academics, activists and Southern partners to explore, from a Christian perspective, issues related to the impact of globalization and technological change on food and to identify strategies to address these issues ecumenically. It was an historic ecumenical event which combined the resources, experience and networks of four ecumenical organizations including the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), Inter-Church Action (ICA), the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).

The purpose of this report is to summarize the overall organization, key discussion points and outcomes of the forum. It is to be accompanied by the Forum Proceedings (see **Appendix A**) which include written reports or summaries of most of the presentations made at the forum.

The forum was organized around the following key objectives:

- to increase understanding of the overlapping issues of food security, food biotechnology and the farm crisis in the context of globalization and to look at the convergence of these issues in the North and the South
- to reflect on these issues from a Christian perspective
- to increase commitment from the Canadian churches to work denominationally and ecumenically to address these issues
- to identify proposals and strategies to follow up on these issues

Three key and overlapping themes were addressed in different sessions of the forum; namely, food security, agricultural biotechnology and the farming crisis. The forum provided a unique and rich opportunity to weave contextual analysis, practical experience, and theological reflection on these issues. There was excellent participation from the diversity of denominational backgrounds represented by the four ecumenical networks and a range of perspective and approaches to the issues including theologians, academics, activists and farmers (see **Appendix B** for list of participants). The forum was greatly enriched by the southern participants from Kenya, Bolivia, Chile and Bangladesh who spoke about their experiences addressing these issues in their regions, the differences and the convergences of the issues in North and South and the need to build bridges between the struggles of farmers and rural communities in the North and the South. But, perhaps most importantly, the southern participants reminded us that there are alternatives to hunger, the farm crisis and biotechnology, and provided concrete examples of farmers and rural communities taking action for positive change.

The farm tour, which preceded the forum, provided an opportunity for the Southern participants as well as some of the urban Canadian participants to visit a number of farms around Winnipeg including large scale livestock farms (hogs and poultry) , a large scale grain farm and a mixed community shared agriculture (CSA) farm. This was an important opportunity to better understand the context of the faming crisis in Canada, the responses of Canadian farmers to globalization and their perspectives on the issues. There was an opportunity to see first hand what Southern partners referred to as a shift from *agri-culture* to *agri-business* in industrialized countries, and the impact of this shift on rural life.

The forum concluded with an attempt to synthesize the issues and strategize about future ecumenical work. Because of the richness and volume of the information presented, there was less time to process the information and strategize on specific mechanisms. Nonetheless, the forum was a historic moment, representing the first time these four ecumenical organizations had worked together to find common analysis. It was a positive, rich, experience resulting in greater trust and understanding of each other's work which will strengthen existing work together and lay a strong foundation for the future. As well, many of the participants, although they were working on the same issues, had never met before, because they were coming at the issues from different perspective and backgrounds. Therefore a unique ad hoc network was created though participation in the forum which may lead to new initiatives.

## THE NATURE OF FOOD

The forum began with a theological reflection on the understanding of food and the earth from an Orthodox and Occidental Christian traditions. Presentations were made from each tradition, recognizing the new insights to be gained by their differences. Both written presentations can be found in Appendix A.

**Spencer Estabrook**, reflected on *food from an Orthodox Christian perspective*, highlighting the importance of the juxtaposition between feasting, as an expression of communion with God and fasting, as a recognition that food is also a means of temptation.. He stressed that feasting and the Eucharistic experience is related to food (and the creation it represents) as a means of communion with God (and among human beings) and noted that commodification and commercialization has taken this away. The importance of food as a means of communion not only with God but also with other human beings, highlights the importance of humanity and compassion in our relationship with food. On the other hand, food as temptation is recognized by periods of fasting as a way of seeking redemption. Spencer Estabrook concluded that fasting and feasting are work complementary aspects of an Orthodox perspective of food.

**Don Schweitzer** then reflected on *the understanding of food in Western Christian thought*. He began by stressing that food is not a major topic in Occidental tradition in itself. The focus is rather on understanding food in terms of relationships; that is, as a gift in terms of God's relationship with people, and as a necessity, responsibility and possibility in terms of our relationship with one another and creation. The presentation examined the impact of globalization on these relationships. In his discussion of food as a gift, Don Schweitzer noted the following:

- food as a gift carries with it both power and responsibility and needs to be seen in the context of gifts to others and Jesus's preferential option of the poor
- there is sometimes a tension between *food as gift* implying an ethical responsibility to others and *food as thing* to be used as we like; the latter leads to an attitude of freedom to do as we like which can be seen in technology
- when there is an uncoupling of food as responsibility and food as a gift, there is a loss of ethics as seen in biotechnology
- food as a gift has power which can be seen in terms of possibility and hope (ie as a means of creating community, attaining salvation and redemption) and as division and disparity when left to the dictates of the market economy

In the discussion which followed, it was argued that there is a danger in Western Christian thought of understanding both food and technology equally as gifts from God. It then becomes difficult to critique technology from an ethical stance. The presenter stressed the need to view technology in recognition of God and in the context of the disparity between rich and poor.

## HUNGER/FOOD SECURITY

The session on food security began with a panel on various approaches to the issue:

**Jim Cornelius**, Executive Director of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, addressed the question, "*how will the world's people be fed?*" He indicated at the outset that he would provide a more conventional view of the issue. He hinted at the direction he believes should be pursued in the form of a question: How do we increase food production in a sustainable manner?

There are 800 million people in the world with insufficient food, mainly in China, India and Africa. Most hungry people are in rural areas. In order to meet their needs, we must increase food production significantly in the next decades. Progress is being made, but it is uneven and the situation in Africa is not improving.

In his presentation, *Sharing of Food: Charity or Justice*, **Mark Charlton**, food aid consultant and professor, stressed the political context of hunger and famine. He argued that famine should not be seen as a crisis which occurs in a neutral context, but as the product of a long process of social and economic disintegration. Similarly, hunger is the result of the stripping of personal assets and coping strategies. Crisis has been used as an opportunity to create further disparity in wealth and power. However, crisis can also be used as an opportunity to show solidarity and charity towards the poor. (Jesus' vision of the banquet - when you give to the poor you will be repaid in redemption). In order to create and sustain healthy communities there is a need to support mechanisms to preserve people's assets and coping mechanisms.

In her presentation, *Food for the Poor - from market or the land*, **Angelica Celis**, Executive Director of the Centre of Education and Technology in Chile, spoke of the need to shift our thinking from "the global and national market" to local markets. The limitations and contradictions of the national market are seen in the disparities which exist within nations and the frequently meager allocation of government resources to rural areas. With globalization this

disparity within and between nations is magnified and the crisis in rural areas deepens. Local markets sustain local food security and sustain rural livelihood. The concept of cultural diversity is important for the survival of local markets since they are dependent on a strong local culture. The important gender dimension of examining these issues at a local level and key role of women in local markets was highlighted. In terms of action, the presenter urged us to support the lobby around the Bill of Farmers' Rights which is based on the universal declaration of human right.

### *The plenary*

In the question/answer section the following issues were raised:

- The idea that increasing food production is central to eradicating hunger in the world was challenged by some participants in the plenary discussion who argued that redistribution and land use issues are more important. People felt that more research was needed to help ascertain how much local food shortages are based on shortages in production versus mal-distribution
- Integration into global market is not the only alternative. There is a need to invest in rural communities and support local markets.
- The focus on food production as opposed to food distribution in addressing hunger and food security has led to an emphasis on technology as the solution and has tended to ignore the need to address distribution and consumption issues in solving world hunger.
- Food security is often framed as a debate between production and distribution/ access and political will. Generally one pole focuses on distribution, arguing that there are enough food and resources in the world, and that issues of distribution and access result in hunger. However, if we simply focus on distribution we ignore the issues of production as they are related to distribution and access and the very real prospect of overall production not keeping pace with overall requirements.. There is a need to consider both. There is also a need to analyze how technology is contributing to food insecurity. We also need to recognize energy consumption required in the production of food and challenge our concept of efficiency. For example, in industrialized agriculture it takes 9 calories of energy in the form of non- renewable fossil fuels to produce 1 calorie of food while in some developing countries one calorie of non renewable energy produces 4 calories of food. Efficiency depends upon what is considered the most important factor of production.
- To ensure food security we need to ensure the security of those who produce food. In the shift from agriculture to agribusiness, the knowledge of the producer or farmer is lost. There is a dehumanization of food production. A participant from Bangladesh argued that we need to distinguish between production of food for money (agri-business ) and production of food as an expression of culture (agriculture).
- It has been demonstrated that small farms can produce more food and are more economically viable, yet politically the focus remains on macro farms and agri-business.

## AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY

The session on biotechnology began with a panel which looked at biotechnology from the perspectives of an agricultural scientist, a Canadian farmer and a Southern farmer. This was followed by a reflection on biotechnology and theology.

**Curtis Rempel**, a research scientist with Monsanto, spoke about the *scientific basis of biotechnology*, arguing that scientists have accelerated the natural processes of genetic engineering in order to benefit humanity. The discussion focused on genetically modified canola and wheat which are resistant to Roundup®, a non-selective plant killer. The key arguments used to justify agricultural biotechnology are 1) the urgent need to produce more food to feed the world's hungry and 2) the need to decrease the use of chemicals in the form of herbicides and pesticides. At the same time, the bottom line for Monsanto as a multinational company is profit. Curtis Rempel argued that it is up to public institutions to monitor the work of Monsanto, but noted that this has become more difficult with the loss of independent, public funding.

**Tony Peters**, Winnipeg farmer and active supporter of the CFGB, began his presentation by asking - "*What kind of caretaker am I?*" He sees himself as a 'caretaker of God's creation', a sacred trust that affects his choices. He spoke of the changes in farming since his father's generation (farmer saved seed, summer fallow instead of sprays to control weeds, mixed animals and crops), the technological revolution in the 1960s and the present hi-tech era and the conflicts many farmers face in their decision whether or not to use biotechnology. He expressed concern about the corporate control of agricultural biotechnology by a few multinational companies, the lack of knowledge of the long-term effects of the technology and the haste with which it is being implemented.

**Farida Aktar**, of UBINIG spoke about *biotechnology from the perspective of her work with small farmers in Bangladesh* and the sustainable agriculture movement (Nayakrishi Andolon). She contrasted her impressions of farming in Canada - few people, mega farms, high levels of technology, little contact with livestock or land, and dictated by the market- with small farmers in Bangladesh who farm largely on subsistence farms, using multi-cropping and sustainable agricultural practices. She stressed that there are alternatives to biotechnology and noted that in developed countries biotechnology is often presented as a choice between two evils - chemicals or biotechnology or, sometimes, economic bankruptcy or biotechnology?. Farmers in Bangladesh and in much of the South have learned from the negative experience of the Green Revolution and are learning from the mistakes in the West in relation to new technologies such as biotechnology. There is a strong fear biotechnology will take away farmers rights to own, control and reproduce their own seeds and crop varieties which they have developed over thousands of years. There is also a deep suspicion of Monsanto which is known as a chemical company and not as a seed producer or philanthropic organization.

### *The Plenary*

In the plenary discussion the following points were raised:

- Technology has been defined simply as any knowledge that we use; however biotechnology has a broader definition because it involves the inter-relationship between technical and biological systems. Monsanto and other ‘life science’ companies are an expression of certain choices in biotechnology which are made by powerful Western multinationals. The danger with biotechnology is that life is seen in terms of utility only, resulting in a loss of the intrinsic value of life itself.
- There are reasons for concern about the safety of Roundup®, specifically the environmental effects of the carrier employed. As well, it was reported that in Australia a grass which is resistant to Roundup® has appeared suggesting that Roundup® resistance is being transferred across species.
- Ending world hunger requires political will affecting the distribution system more than technological change. It was argued that Monsanto as a multinational motivated by profits has a limited role to play in addressing world hunger.

Participants then divided into small groups and reflected on the presentations and the general question- *is biotechnology an ethical/ moral debate or simply about control and economics?* Some of the key points raised included:

- We do not know what is in our food and have no way of knowing. It was suggested that the churches lobby for enforced labelling of food including food aid. This is probably an issue we could build consensus around, it has concrete and attainable results and it is also a means of consumer education.
- What is our understanding of the meaning of ‘change’? Who has the right to decide on issues like biotechnology when the impact is felt by all of humanity?
- Biotechnology represents the use of technology to fix technology. What is the real benefit?
- Concern was expressed about the polarization of the issues. What is the middle ground?
- With biotechnology farmers take 100% of the risk and receive only a fraction of the benefit.
- Biotechnology represents a choice between the accumulation of wealth versus long-term harmony.
- A key issue with biotechnology is “Who holds the corporations accountable?”.

### *Agricultural Biotechnology And Theology*

**Eric Beresford**, Ethics Consultant for the Anglican Church, reflected on the ethical issues surrounding biotechnology and examined the question - *Are we co- creators.... or playing God?* (His complete paper is included in the proceedings). He argued that to be co-creators is not equivalent to playing God and that the desire and practice of changing nature is a human characteristic. Therefore, we cannot dismiss biotechnology as unethical simply because it is

done by humans and not by God.

He argued that the ethical critique of biotechnology, is found rather in social and economic practices and the use of power and control. The ethical critique is therefore shifted to the biotechnology industry as opposed to the process itself. In this critique, the powerful multinationals who control bio-technology and claim this knowledge through patents, trade related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) and other mechanisms of corporate control, are guilty of playing God or hubris as the idea of ownership of knowledge directly contradicts the concept of Creation as a gift to all.

## **THE CRISIS IN FARMING - Realities facing Rural Communities**

The “farm crisis” session was divided into two roundtables. The first session provided a descriptive survey of the realities facing rural communities in general and farmers (both in Canada and in Africa) in particular.

**Chris Hamblin**, a Manitoba farmer and organizer in Keystone Agricultural Producers, explained the farming crisis and the increased vulnerability of Canadian farmers using a series of charts (which can be found in Appendix A). Factors which contribute to the farming crisis in Canada include the fact that although the cost of inputs have increased, the net income has remained virtually stagnant over the past 30 years. Food costs are in fact lower than they were 50 years ago compared to the cost of living although inflation has increased the prices of everything else (including inputs). At the same time as farmers are facing increasing vulnerability as a result of a decrease in their assets, government subsidies have been dramatically reduced. As the result of WTO agreements, traditional crops like wheat are not longer economically viable for Canadian farmers to produce. There has been an increase in the cost of inputs without an increase in market value. In response to this crisis, farmers have diversified their farms, shifting from traditional crops such as wheat to livestock (poultry and hogs). As well, farmers are seeking technologies, such as biotechnology, which allow them to produce more through specialized crops.

**Linda Wegner**, Saskatchewan farm writer, spoke about *the impact of the farming crisis on rural communities* from her experience as a consultant and facilitator of workshops for farmers on stress management. She noted that in Saskatchewan there were 99 farm bankruptcies, in 1999 and that Saskatchewan represents 40% of all farm bankruptcies in Canada. Some of the images and observations she shared were: closing social services (schools, hospitals, post offices etc); the trauma of watching wooden grain elevators being torn down and, only rarely, replaced by large, concrete, centralized structures; the decrease in community activity; the closing of local grocery stores and the increase in social problems such as suicides. As an image of hope for the future, she compared the present crisis to fog, urging us to remember that the crisis, like fog, would not last forever and would not move permanent objects.

**Anne Mutisya**, development coordinator of the Anglican Church of Kenya, talked about the *farming crisis in Africa* and in particular the impact on Kenyan farmers. (Her complete paper is

found in Appendix A). She noted that her area, the ‘Horn of Africa’ is endowed with rich human and natural resources; yet food aid has become the norm as opposed to the practice, raising serious issues of food sovereignty. She noted that Africa has been promised prosperity and equity by different international actors and summit (ie the Social Summit and the World Food Summit), but in Kenya alone there are 12 million people who are food insecure.

Most farming in Kenya is at a subsistence level, based on integrated and holistic systems. She stressed the importance of gender analysis in understanding household farming, noting that generally women are responsible for subsistence farming, yet it is the men who make decisions on land - use and often favour cash crops. This leads to a tension in the household, usually along gender lines, between household food security and cash crops.

From her work in global networks working on international trade and agriculture, she stressed the high level of commonality between the issues faced in Canada and in Africa. She noted that the churches have been significant in their silence on these issues and stressed the need to build international alliances. She referred to the Memorandum of Understanding from the Lambeth Conference between the World Bank/IMF and African church leaders and the World Council of Churches Report on Poverty and Justice as important background documents.

### *The Plenary*

In the plenary after this first session, the following issues were raised:

- Farmers will do everything in their power to avoid bankruptcies. Therefore, farm bankruptcies represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of the impact of the farming crisis on farmers
- The farm crisis has been internalized, resulting in social problems and the breakdown of community.
- There has not only been a loss in farmers but a also a loss in farm leaders, which has severely weakened the capacity of rural communities to respond to the farming crisis.
- An emerging trend in the USA is for farmers to become contract farmers, supplying land and labour to multinational companies. This has been referred to as the “new age of feudalism”
- It is important to recognize that 65% of farmers’ income is from off the farm
- When efficiency is seen as centralization ( ie centralization of grain elevators etc.), the producers end up paying the cost.

### *Theological Reflection On The Farm Crisis*

The second session of the “Farm Crisis” featured two presentations designed to grind a theological lens through which to see and respond to the issues identified in the first session.

In his presentation on the *theology of the land*, **Loren Wilkinson**, theologian and professor, spoke of the first covenant in terms of the three way relationship between God, the land (Eden)

and humanity (Adam). In this triangle, the blessing from God flows in both directions, to land and to humanity, and God's purpose is for human beings to be in a relationship with the land so that there is a harmonious relationship between God, land and people. When any of these relationships are disturbed so is the relationship with land. Competition for or on the land ('eat or be eaten') is a manifestation of the disruption of relationships. He argued that as Christians we need to think of creation as all living things, and not simply those creatures which are economically useful to humans (Noah admitted all creatures to the Ark). Human beings have a unique but lesser relationship with creation, but he argued that human activity should be seen as 'sub-creation', rather than 'co-creation'. Deeply implicit in the idea that land is a gift from God is a warning against hubris. Professor Wilkinson ended with a vision of a new creation or 'shalom', in which there is a realization of God's purpose in creation.

**Cam Harder**, theologian, pastor and rural issues specialist, reflected on the *theology of community* in the context of the farming crisis, based on his recent research on farm bankruptcies. He noted the strong feeling of shame and disgrace associated with farm bankruptcies. The farmer's shame and being shamed make public discussion about the future very difficult. The strong values on personal autonomy and control in the prairies lead to a belief in the survival of the fittest. These cultural values are sometimes reinforced by religious belief which view success as a blessing from God and therefore equate wealth to righteousness.

On the other hand, churches have had an important role in revitalizing communities by offering a caring, non-judgmental environment. Despite the obstacles to providing this support, pastors have the advantage of being able to visit farmers discretely and indiscriminately and offer support at times of economic crisis. Churches need to be careful that this support is not perceived as charity and offer opportunities for farmers to reciprocate. Cam Harder argued that the expression of pain by farmers and communities who are in trouble is in fact a sign of hope and that churches can express this in their liturgy.

### *Small Groups Reports*

Participants then divided into small groups to discuss the problems contributing to the farm crisis and to make suggestions for responses, both at a general level and from church communities. The issues and proposals raised by the different groups are included in **Appendix C**. There was considerable overlap in the identification and analysis of the problems. On a very general level, the key issues which emerged were:

- the global economic system, and the loss of human values and humanity within this system
- the concentration and centralization of power, control, wealth and land
- the weakened relationship/ alienation from the land and from one another
- the separation between rural and urban communities
- disintegration and division of rural communities

As well, there was overlap in the proposals which were made to respond to the crisis, both on a general level and the specific suggestions made for the churches. Some of the general strategies that were proposed included:

- strengthen links between rural and urban communities/ producers and consumers/ rural and urban churches
- provide intentional support to alternative farming and Community Shared Agriculture
- strengthen theological foundations on food and land issues
- support rural churches and farmers' voices within the churches

## **PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER**

In the final session participants were asked to caucus as the four ecumenical, sponsoring organizations and suggest action items to respond to the themes of the panel. Suggestions were made on how to improve existing work and for follow up within the existing ecumenical structures. These were presented to the plenary and the notes from these presentations are included in **Appendix D**.

In the final plenary, there was some discussion about the possibility of the formation of an ecumenical reference group which would allow for continued work on these issues and collaboration, particularly around policy and advocacy work. However, it was decided that there was not the capacity and resources within the ecumenical networks represented to sustain another ecumenical structure or program. It was felt that the *ad hoc* network of participants resulting from the forum would allow for continued discussion on the issues and ongoing links between the theologians, farmers, activists and church workers who were present. It was agreed that the participating organizations should concentrate on enhancing *existing* ecumenical initiatives based on the learning and analysis of the forum, including the specific proposals on biotechnology issues (i.e. greater collaboration between the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches working groups of biotechnology). In recognizing the value of the theological discussions, it was agreed to strengthen the links which were made during the forum with theologians and seminaries, particularly concerning the theology of the land and the churches' response to the crisis in rural communities

In conclusion, it was agreed that the most important outcome of the forum was that it represented the first time that InterChurch Action, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches had worked together on these critical issues. It was a positive and rich experience which resulted in greater trust and understanding of each other's work which, in turn, would make it easier to work together in the future. It was also agreed that the report and full proceedings of the forum are needed for the ongoing analysis on these issues and to share lessons of the forum with others – local churches, rural communities, denominations, seminaries and ecumenical organizations.

It was agreed that a follow up meeting of the four sponsoring organizations would be held in March/April 2001, to make an assessment of the outcomes.

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