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GLOBAL FOOD & FARMING

Safe Space for Common Ground

We Need More than Rice on the Floor

BY BETHANY SPICHER SCHONBERG

Volunteers passed out water and rice to the restless people crowded on the floor of the church hall, but there wasn't enough to go around. Tonight, everyone would go hungry.

Hurricane evacuees? Refugees fleeing famine? Migrants crossing the desert? Actually, the scene is from an MCC East Coast Hunger Banquet held this fall at Park View Mennonite Church (Harrisonburg, Va.).

In proportions that match global realities, 15 percent of the guests were directed to candle-lit tables for a three-course dinner. Twenty-five percent ate a simple meal of beans and rice, while the remaining 60 percent sat on the floor for a cup of rice.

During the meal, guests listened to hunger statistics and stories from around the globe, and learned about impending votes by the U.S. Congress that could cut social programs at home and hurt small farmers worldwide, while lowering taxes for wealthy U.S. Americans.

A local Shenandoah Valley farmer, an immigrant from Honduras, an African student and former MCC workers all told the same story: the prevailing system of trade and agriculture is neither feeding the world nor caring for creation.

In this issue of the *Washington Memo*, the last in our year-long safe space dialogue series, we explore food and agriculture issues, in preparation for next year's spring seminar on the same topic (March 5–7, 2006).

Hector Mondragon, Colombian economist, and Chris Gingrich, economics professor at Eastern Mennonite University, share their perspectives on the roots of food insecurity, including unbalanced subsidies and unjust trade agreements (p. 6).

Cathleen Hockman-Wert, co-author of MCC's newest cookbook, *Simply in Season*, calls eating a moral—and political—act (p. 4).

Lora Steiner tells the stories of farmers impacted by the North American Free Trade Agreement (p. 5), Daryl Byler recalls Jesus' admonishment: "Give them something to eat," (p. 2) and David Whettstone remembers people on the margins after Hurricane Katrina (p. 3).

In the short-term aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, people in poverty need food stamps, housing assistance and health care. Immigrants without documents need protected status. The soil, water, plants and animals need to be restored.

A long term response, however, requires acknowledging that people were hungry before Katrina. Our nation's roots of racial discrimination and environmental degradation go deep, and poverty is on the rise.

Katrina has opened an opportunity to do more than hand out rice. May we also change the policies that keep people on the floor—not only in New Orleans, but in church halls around the world. ■

Over and over, we've heard the same story: the prevailing system of trade and agriculture is neither feeding the world nor caring for creation.

For information about hunger banquets, visit Oxfam America, www.oxfamamerica.org.

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

In the face of a hungry world, God expects humans to play a critical role as well. Today, Jesus would likely say to us: “You give them something to eat.”

You give them something to eat

Growing vegetables in our postage-stamp-sized back yard on Capitol Hill has become a delightful form of recreation. Advocating for more just and peaceful U.S. policies—the focus of our work in MCC’s Washington Office—can be a slow and long-term process. Gardening offers much quicker results!

Even at age 50, I still marvel that one can drop tiny seeds in the earth and, within days, watch tender sprouts break through the ground and stretch into bean- and cucumber- and tomato-yielding plants. And how much easier it is to step into the back yard to collect fresh ingredients for a meal, than to fight city traffic in order to buy them at the grocery store!

The earth produces bountiful resources—enough for all. So there’s no good reason that 3 million children go to bed hungry in the United States, according to Bread for the World. Or that more than 800 million people globally don’t have enough to eat.

The psalmist says that God “upholds all who are falling” and gives them “their food in due season” (Psalm 145:14–15). While God sometimes provides manna miraculously (Exodus 16), in most cases, God uses human agents and actions to assure that no one goes hungry.

God prevented a global famine through Joseph’s business acumen (Genesis 40–47). God instructed growers not to harvest the edges of their fields or to strip bare their vineyards so that orphans, widows and

immigrants could glean the remains (Leviticus 19:9–10, Deuteronomy 24:1–22). God ordered a Year of Jubilee every 50 years so that all would have land on which to grow food (Leviticus 25). God used skilled and compassionate deacons to assure that food was fairly distributed in the early church (Acts 6).

One of my favorite Bible stories since childhood is of Jesus feeding the crowd of 5,000-plus people. When his disciples tried to send the hungry crowd away, Jesus said, “You give them something to eat” (Luke 9:13). Feeding the crowd required a divine-human partnership.

So too today. God still shines the sun and sends the rain that cause crops to grow. But in the face of a hungry world, God expects humans to play a critical role as well. Jesus would likely say to us: “You give them something to eat.”

We do so by sending shipments of grain. But also by consuming fewer resources ourselves. And by living more justly. And by advocating for policies that ensure an equitable distribution of food.

Indeed, there are many causes of global hunger. Wars, international debt, disease, water shortages and unfair trade policies and practices all affect who eats and who doesn’t. Each time we work to address one of these issues, we help insure that another child will have enough to eat.

As we gather with loved ones for Thanksgiving meals and to celebrate God’s bounty and blessings, may we be both grateful and sobered by Jesus’ words: “You give them something to eat.”

Grateful as we remember all who have faithfully partnered with God to bring food to our table. And sobered as we confess that global hunger would not exist if we took Jesus seriously. ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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To contact the MCC U.S. Washington Office, please see our address on the back page. See our weekly commentary at www.thirdway.com and visit our web site at www.mcc.org/us/washington.

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Who is the Shepherd?

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . . I will feed them with justice (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 16).

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we again learn a simple lesson: everybody counts. At the time of this writing, it is estimated that more than one million people have been displaced, more than one thousand killed (most unidentified), and 46,000 people are still living in shelters. Thousands of families have been abruptly separated.

Everyone is important and precious, but disasters offer the worst challenges to this conviction. In calm or crisis, people at margins—whether deliberate or unintended—are forgotten or unattended.

The gravely ill and patients in hospitals and nursing homes were among the severely stricken. Some believe that their casualties were due to neglect and were preventable.

Nearly 3,000 children are reported still missing, but experts believe that many will be reunited with their families. Advocates like the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana are concerned with additional trauma to incarcerated youth. They are maintaining youth's connections to family and lawyers.

Human Rights Watch reports that 600 inmates near New Orleans were abandoned. They were left locked in an Orleans Parish Prison compound for as long as four days in rising flood water without food or drinking water. There are 517 inmates missing from the list of people evacuated from the jail.

Who should find the missing and lost? Everyone. Sadly in the regular order of things, government and society are not essentially (or centrally) organized to find the lost. The U.S. Department of Justice has asked the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children to take reports of missing children and adults. The American Red Cross is putting forth a similar effort. Perhaps all most of us can do is pray. Our present crisis has pushed us beyond the norm. May our prayers and actions avail the safety and reuniting of everyone. ■

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

Everyone is important and precious, but often, people at the margins are forgotten or unattended.

CAPITAL QUOTES

“Defeating poverty is not a question of whether we can, but of whether we care. Extreme poverty exists not because it’s inevitable, but because we—collectively and individually—have allowed it. And make no mistake, what we have the power to allow, we have the power to erase.”

—Madeline Albright, former Secretary of State, September 11, 2005

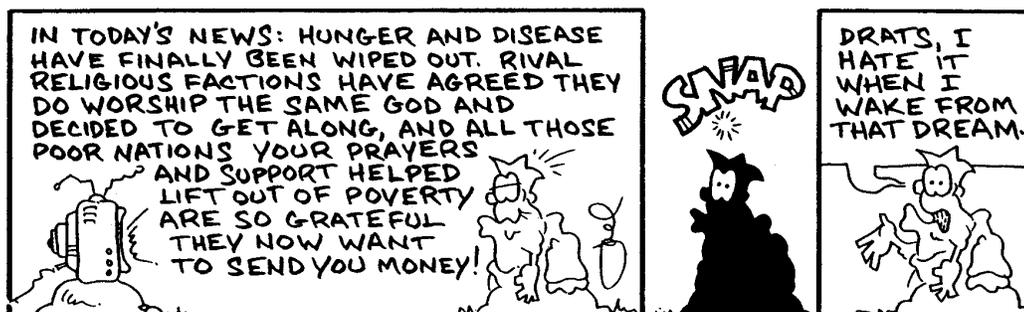
“If no compromise [on Iraq’s constitution] is reached . . . the country will slowly dissolve into civil war and disintegrate.”

—Joost Hiltermann, Crisis Group Middle East Project Director, September 16, 2005

“If we can create a coalition of hawks, tree huggers, sodbusters, do-gooders, and Christian fundamentalists supporting these initiatives, then we have a pretty good share of the country.”

—Former CIA director James Woolsey, on the broad support for clean energy and other environmental issues

Pontius' Puddle



Eating: A Political Act?

BY CATHLEEN
HOCKMAN-WERT

Cathleen Hockman-Wert, a member of Corvallis Mennonite Fellowship (Corvallis, Ore.), was co-editor of *Simply in Season: Recipes that Celebrate the Rhythm of the Land in the Spirit of More-with-Less*.

It's in the accumulation of tiny choices that we determine as a community how we will live together.

A few months after the spring release of AMCC's new cookbook, *Simply in Season*, my co-author, Mary Beth Lind, and I were featured guests in a teleconference seminar hosted by a homemaking Web site. Our interviewer began the hour with questions about the philosophy behind *Simply in Season*. We hadn't talked for more than 10 minutes about the many good reasons to choose local food before she laughed a bit nervously and said, "Well, who says we shouldn't get into politics!"

It took me by surprise because I don't tend to think about the issues discussed in *Simply in Season* as "political."

As the third in MCC's World Community Cookbook series, *Simply in Season* follows in the tradition established by the classic *More-with-Less Cookbook*. As Doris Janzen Longacre so eloquently argued in 1976, the choices we make about food have far-reaching ramifications—on our own health and pocketbooks, yes, but also on the environment and other people worldwide. *Simply in Season* seeks to update the issues at stake today. It introduces readers to topics including sustainable farming methods, concentrated animal feeding operations, biotechnology and genetically modified foods, the economics of agribusinesses and global trade policies.

Hmm. I suppose those *are* political issues.

Yet the way I tend to think about my food choices has more to do with spirituality. I believe, as the National Catholic Rural Life Conference puts it, that eating is a moral issue.

This isn't about a spiritual feeling one might get in taking a bite of succulent grass-fed lamb or sweet melon from the organic farm down the road. For me, if there's a feeling at all it's more like the quiet satisfaction I get from tithing: the feeling of doing the right thing.

As stated in the *Simply in Season* introduction, "Each food purchase we make is like a vote for the way we want food to be produced—and for the world in which we want to live." In choosing local, sustainably—produced and fairly—traded foods, we can help preserve God's creation and support small farmers around the globe.

And aren't all the choices we make in this way—all the ways we enact our faith in our daily living—political? For it's in the accumulation of these tiny choices that we determine as a community how we will live together.

The seminar took place a few days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, and our call ended with discussion of ways to stretch meals to feed sudden guests evacuated from the region. Callers commented on the rising cost of gasoline and how that will affect food prices.

It needn't take a hurricane to get us thinking about where our food comes from. My hope for readers of *Simply in Season* is that they'll find more than a collection of great recipes—which it is. I hope they'll discover more than some wonderful new vegetables and ways of preparing them at the peak of nutrition and taste—which they will.

I pray all of us may be inspired to help make a better world for all God's children, one meal at a time. ■

WORLD COMMUNITY COOKBOOKS

There are three books in the series of World Community Cookbooks published by MCC and Herald Press.

The *More-With-Less Cookbook* by Doris Janzen Longacre, was first published in 1976.

Extending the Table, edited by Joetta Handrich Schlabach and Kristina Mast Burnett, was first published in 1991.

Simply in Season, was published in 2005, and co-edited by Mary Beth Lind and Cathleen Hockman-Wert.

Mexico, Trade and Migration

Every year, thousands of undocumented Mexicans try to cross the border into the United States. The migrants come for a chance at a better life, or to support their families, but mostly they come, driven by one thing: desperation.

Pedro Torres and Jesús Leon are farmers in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Chihuahua, who recently traveled to the United States to present a perspective on migration rarely heard here.

In the early 1990s, when Pedro and Jesús first heard of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), they began working to oppose it, holding protests and appointing a congress of Mexican farmers to be spokespeople for the movement, but to no avail. The agreement was implemented in 1994.

Around that time, Jesús recalled watching the prices of beans and other crops. “We assumed prices would rise a little bit each year, but they weren’t rising,” he said. Eventually, the farmers figured out why: beans, corn and other heavily-subsidized crops were being imported from the United States, and sold at cheaper prices than the food produced by local farmers.

In the last eleven years, the price that farmers receive for their corn has dropped by nearly half. Meanwhile, the cost of fertilizers has risen by 500 percent and the price for the staple of the Mexican diet, the corn tortilla, has risen 600 percent.

The percentage of Mexicans living in poverty has also risen. In 1990, it was around 20 percent. Now, more than 40 percent of all Mexicans live on less than two dollars per day.

And since NAFTA began, the number of people immigrating to the United States has tripled.

The reasons behind this are complex: each year, around one million Mexican teenagers come of age and need to find work. There

is less of a social safety net when people do lose their jobs. Economic and natural disasters tend to impact developing countries more heavily than developed countries.

But Jesús says that these conditions—falling prices for crops and the rising cost of food—have led to high unemployment rates and increased drug trafficking. “It’s not just affecting economic life,” he says, “But also our culture and social life.”

In the United States, free trade is lauded for its ability to create new jobs and open new markets, but the agreements themselves often include provisions which are harmful to the poorest people.

For example, under NAFTA, certain types of seeds have been patented, meaning that farmers have to buy new seeds every year, which they can’t afford to do. Patents on drugs mean that governments can’t produce generic versions, which is crucial when it comes to medicines for malaria or AIDS.

Conditions of the free trade agreements also force governments to sell off public services such as electricity, water and sanitation to private companies which operate for profit. Privatization often raises the cost of such services taking them out of reach for the average person.

Phillip Dahl-Brenadine, who works in Mexico with the Catholic organization Maryknoll, told a reporter that trade agreements are problematic because they “cause people to lose their lands and not be able to feed their families.” Mexican farmers, he continued, “Understand that farmers here and there have a common cause and the agreements are not helping either . . . We do not need prices tied to the international market. We need prices that reflect the cost of production in both places.” ■

BY LORA STEINER

In Mexico, falling prices for crops and the rising cost of living have led to high unemployment and other problems, affecting the social fabric of communities.

WELCOME!

This month, we welcome Angong Acuil and Amanda Gross to our staff. Angong is a recent Bluffton grad and will be covering Africa and environmental policy, while Amanda, an EMU student, is interning with us and following women’s issues.

Global Food and Farming Issues: Two Perspectives

Washington Memo: *Church statements from around the world have upheld that the vitality of family farmers is crucial to global food security. Proponents of agricultural concentration and industrialization, on the other hand, fear that small farms cannot feed the world. What is your vision for a just food system?*

Hector: For many decades it was believed that great production would eliminate hunger, that the world could manage without *campesinos* [peasant farmers], and that *campesinos* were an obstacle to development and were doomed to disappear, but none of this has proved true. Today, the transnational food and agricultural chemical companies, as well as those who promote mega-projects and investments in rural areas, think it is time to get rid of “primitive” farmers. Why are these sermons false?

Currently there are 3 million *campesinos* in the world. Experience has shown that the world’s industrial economy can not give jobs or incomes to the *campesinos* it displaces. At the same time, studies of income and consumption patterns in large cities show that millions of people cannot afford the food items required for a healthy sustenance and therefore cannot access the products of the new technological and biotechnological revolution, just as they could not access the food from the “green revolution.” (In Bogota, 43 percent of the population does not earn enough to consume half the proteins and vitamins necessary. Meanwhile, the richest 3 percent consumes double the necessary amount.)

Chris: Current domestic and international agricultural policies create significant injustices in the global food system. Canada, the United States, the European Union and Japan all provide billions of dollars in both direct and indirect agricultural subsidies under the guise of food security. Unfortunately, the only clear result is excess production, which causes environmental damage and depressed global commodity prices. The latter is particularly troublesome since low commodity prices hurt farmers in poor countries.

Many poor countries also employ macro-economic policies that harm their own agricultural sectors, though that trend has reversed somewhat in the past two decades. The question of a just food system should not pit big farmers versus small farmers since both groups participate in subsidy programs.

It is also oversimplified to say that either big or small farmers can best feed the world. In countries with dense populations, small farmers likely provide the least costly way of producing food. Small farmers are also incredibly creative and can grow food using sustainable methods where not possible using capital intensive farming. Conversely, it is wasteful to assume that “smaller is better” in countries with sparse population and expensive labor, provided that subsidies are not the reason for large farms.

WM: *Which agricultural trade policies promote, and which threaten, global food security? Specifically, what are the pros and cons of trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA?*

Chris: As far as overall impact on food security, the World Trade Organization (WTO) deserves more attention than either NAFTA or CAFTA. Regional trade agreements such as NAFTA, CAFTA, and various bilateral agreements are growing in number precisely because rich countries can avoid difficult questions regarding agricultural subsidies. Poor countries at the current WTO Doha negotiations are united [in demanding] that rich countries’ agricultural subsidies must stop. Consequently, the Doha negotiations are stalled and at risk of failing. The regional and bilateral trade agreements between rich and poor countries probably do not add to food security, and may even reduce food security in poor countries if they produce a large inflow of subsidized commodities.

Hector: Chemical and biological technologies, as well as mega-projects and agribusiness, forestry, petroleum and mine exploitation in rural areas have costs that are not paid for: use of water, massive

In large cities, millions of people cannot afford the food items required for a healthy sustenance.

—HECTOR MONDRAGON

destruction of non-renewable natural resources, damage to the soil, elimination of biodiversity and ecosystems . . .

Investors appropriate resources freely and destroy them with impunity, which causes social catastrophes and generates millions of new hungry people around the world.

WM : *How can individuals and churches most effectively respond to food insecurity, locally and globally?*

Hector: In a number of countries throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia, a small group of large landowners amasses the property of the best lands for the purpose of price speculation. If *campesinos* could receive more and better land it would eliminate hunger and poverty in their country. In Colombia, for example, 0.4 percent of landowners owns 61.2 percent of the land but only 9 percent of the total sowed fields. Meanwhile, small enterprises, with only 14 percent of the land (generally of lesser quality), have 43 percent of the sown area and produce more than 50 percent of the food consumed in the country.

The *campesino* economy has its own rationale based on guaranteeing sustenance, and improving quality of life for families and of family work. (Sometimes *campesinos* are better able to resist crises: before the international price of coffee fell, 55 percent of the Colombian coffee production was company owned and 45 percent was produced by *campesinos*; now 80 percent is *campesino* small farms that produce fruit and other foods simultaneously.) *Campesinos* can assimilate new technologies, but at the same time, tend to be more protective of the natural environment because they depend directly on it. *Campesino* multi-crop systems protect biodiversity and permit the production of different nutrients. In many countries the number of *campesinos* has not been reduced, but continues to grow. The role of *campesinos* or farmers was crucial to the development of countries such as Switzerland, France, the United States, Denmark and South Korea, and it

will continue to be in many other places.

Chris: Rich country residents should speak loudly and clearly to their governments that agricultural subsidies hurt poor farmers' ability to earn a living. This does not mean that governments, both rich and poor, should never assist farmers and rural communities. Rather, such assistance should not be linked to farm planting decisions, which is a frequent cause of overproduction with current subsidy programs. One popular notion is that locally grown food necessarily promotes food security. Unfortunately, these sentiments arise more from romantic images of farming than an accurate picture of food security. It is important to realize that in most regions food insecurity arises from inadequate and unstable household incomes and not food shortages. International aid organizations have also reduced agricultural development spending during the past 20 years. That trend must be reversed, and especially in regions with deteriorating natural environments.

WM : *What biblical texts, images or ideas inform your views about agriculture and trade?*

Chris: My biggest influences are experiences from my family's grain and livestock farm, MCC service assignments in Haiti, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and evidence from academic research.

Hector: Just like Ahab desired Naboth's vine (1 Kings 21), today transnational capitals desire the territories of millions of *campesinos* around the world. Today's Jezebels use laws, free trade agreements and wars to impose expropriations for "strategic" projects, intellectual property of seeds and subsidized imports from powerful countries. It is the church's duty to reject the proposals of these Jezebels (Revelation 2:20), with the conviction that to defend today's Naboths is also to feed millions of hungry people. ■

Chris Gingrich is Professor of Economics at Eastern Mennonite University, and a member of Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va.

Hector Mondragon is a member of Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogota, Colombia, and is currently economic adviser to the National Council of the Agricultural Sector in Colombia.

The question of a just food system should not pit big farmers versus small farmers. It is also oversimplified to say that either big or small farmers can best feed the world.

—CHRIS GINGRICH



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See the MCC Washington Office's new, improved Web site, with advocacy tools, online resources, printable materials and information about our year-long focus on safe-space dialogue. There's something new every time you check www.mcc.org/us/washington.

**Washington Office
Spring Seminar**

Join us for our annual spring seminar, March 5-7, 2006! This year's seminar is entitled, "Voices Around the Table: Stories of Food from CAFTA to the Corner Store," and will focus on global food and farming issues.

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
ISRAEL-PALESTINE	Israel has ended its occupation of the Gaza Strip, but in the West Bank, continues to construct settlements, by-pass roads and a separation barrier/wall that are effectively dividing the West Bank into pieces and cutting it off from Jerusalem.	Urge President Bush to offer generous economic aid for the Gaza Strip, and to challenge Prime Ministers Sharon and Abbas to take bold steps to create a just peace. Actions that solidify the Israeli occupation of the West Bank are not in the long-term interests of either Israelis or Palestinians.
IMMIGRATION REFORM	Immigrants are dying on the border, being exploited in workplaces and still coming to the United States. Congress is deciding between proposals to increase militarization at the border or to comprehensively change immigration policy.	Encourage your legislators to co-sponsor the Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act (S. 1033, H.R. 2330). Contact the MCC Washington Office for an analysis of the bill's strengths and weaknesses.

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