

ACF update

Bulletin of the Agricultural Christian Fellowship

Summer 2008

Editorial

This update is meant to help us to see things from a God's eye view – both the 'worldly', bleak and hopeful, and the Divine love and will.

The overwhelming reality seems to be that the world food 'system' driven by shallow idols, greedy power and ignorance has become dysfunctional. For years farmers all over the World have been afflicted by poor prices, lack of consistent extension or advisory services, poor or meagre research and a low estimation of their calling. Huge concentrations of power have been allowed to build up on both the input and output side, and these have then been allowed to steer public policy. Eighty poor countries now depend on food imports and nobody it seems can mobilise any reserves in time of sudden shortage. The remedies being urged – a bigger, better World Trade Deal, 'opening markets', more genetic modulation complete with patents, and one size fits all technology, and public contributions to the work of the corporations are, at best, irrelevant – at worst, pernicious.

For a season, this set up may now favour farmers with higher prices, but in the long run? As Christians, we need to reflect on the basis of all this. Is it not economic theory, allied with greed – a worship of 'the market?' It is not a way of doing things based on the varied realities of climate, soil, animals, food and humans and certainly seems to owe little to the Divine will for Creation and Humanity. It hardly seems a promising basis for tacking climate change BUT after Crucifixion, Resurrection.

There is hope. More and more people are grasping the reality. A recent international panel of 400 scientists, public and private, chaired by Defra's Chief Scientist recently published the result of four year's work. 'Business as usual' cannot continue. Our own leaders are nearly ready to talk about food security.

Together with the Arthur Rank Centre, this Fellowship launched what has miraculously become a major sign of hope and of the Kingdom – Farm Crisis Network.

We need to go on discerning the signs of the times and not fear to go where God then leads us.

The next ACF Conference: CLIMATE CHANGE AND FARMING, Monday 17th November, Stoneleigh

Climate Change is a subject that is now uppermost in many minds – but thinking about it does not necessarily mean facing it!

Talking to people, we have been struck by the wide range of opinions expressed. To help us to relate to what people are actually thinking there is a little questionnaire or opinion poll – **please send it in (even if you already know that you cannot be there).**

In the next Update we hope to run one or two preparatory articles and tell you the outcome of the questionnaire.

The conference will look at the science and the biblical framework for what is happening, and then consider practical farm issues which apply at the global, national and individual farm levels.

Christopher Jones will set the context and summarise at the end. The other speakers will be:-

Martin Hodson, an environmental biologist at Oxford Brookes University and his wife **The Reverend Margot Hodson**, a theologian and Oxford college chaplain.

Both have done a lot of work on this subject with The John Ray Initiative and they have just published a book together – 'Cherishing the Earth- how to care for God's Creation' published by Monarch books. Martin recently toured England speaking on the science of Climate Change with the Hope for Planet Earth tour, speaking to some 5000 school pupils and 3000 others.

Martin has talked with the FCN Coordinators on part of this subject and related it to farming very well.

In the afternoon, we will have group discussions on such items as:-

- ❖ Biofuels
- ❖ the future role of nitrogen and other fertilisers
- ❖ new crops
- ❖ local marketing
- ❖ the probable and proper role for regulation
- ❖ the situation of farmers in poor countries.

We aim to have one person in each group who has useful knowledge and experience. We want this process before, during and after to be embedded in prayer and reflection.

The day will also, of course, include the ACF's Annual General Meeting. Aim to be there!



Martin and Margot Hodson



Ivor Macdonald's croft on Skye

The Contribution of Crofting

Ivor MacDonald, minister of the gospel and crofter

“Crofting is a piece of ground surrounded by legislation.” Someone whose only acquaintance with crofting is via that cynical definition is unlikely to consider it as having much contribution to make to the direction of farm policy. And that is probably true unless and until keeping people on the land becomes an objective.

Maximising the input of people is usually far from the minds of agricultural economists. For a long time it has been assumed that “progress” will entail a reduction in the numbers involved in agriculture. For example, whenever the mantra of “efficiency” is invoked what is generally in mind is output per labour unit. The aim of such efficiency “is therefore to produce more using less people. (Other ways of measuring efficiency such as output per unit of fossil fuel, for example, would yield a very different result). Similarly, “reducing inputs” often means no more than replacing the human input (labour) by fossil fuel dependent inputs of machinery fertiliser, pesticides etc. That most odious of euphemisms, “restructuring,” is simply another way of saying farm amalgamation.

As Christians we do, of course, want to be confident that the Bible shapes our position rather than a gut instinct on what is right or wrong. We have to tread carefully when attempting to read off contemporary application from the Old Testament. Much Old Testament teaching either functions uniquely within the theocracy of Israel or is intended to teach spiritual lessons that find their fulfilment in Christ. Nevertheless, if we take these factors into account, Old testament teaching on the land and community can function paradigmatically. We can recognise general principles that are to be heeded in a Christian approach to land issues.

It is fair to say that an agricultural policy that sought to follow the Old Testament paradigm would seek to maximise the number of people engaged. One of God's earliest commands is to “fill the earth and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:28). **The land laws in Canaan are designed to protect the connection to the land of Israelite families. The Jubilee law limited the use of land as a capital asset.**

One system of land tenure that has the potential to fulfil the biblical ideal is the crofting system as found in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Crofts are small units of land typically with less than 30 acres of arable ground. Most have a share in hill grazing. Most are tenanted and have security of tenure and succession.

Crofting's contribution to a Biblical model of land tenure is that it has succeeded in maintaining a relatively high population living on the land and engaged in agriculture/earth care. Historically, a young person did not have to be wealthy in order to obtain a piece of ground. **Land was not regarded as a capital asset** and the Crofters' Commission, the regulating body was charged with ensuring that land was retained for agriculture and that a flow of new entrants was maintained. Crofting has been cushioned from the economic pressures of agriculture in that it has always been a part time occupation. In the past the main source of income was derived from gathering kelp, fishing, seasonal work in the Lowlands, and weaving. Today crofters can work for the health service, tourism, or IT companies. The system traditionally depended on communal effort to gather sheep, shear, dip etc. This communal dimension is often in tension with the demands of modern occupations but where it is effective it strengthens community life. Township committees take corporate decisions.

Judged on its contribution to food supply crofting would never be a big player. However, contemporary crofting has a contribution to make in other areas that are increasingly valuable in the 21st century. It is now seen as **unique custodian of the environment**. Non-intensive methods of farming are traditional here and people working small areas of ground are best placed to steward the environment. It is also the **guardian of a unique cultural heritage**. Thirdly the large areas of peat land within crofting areas are now highly regarded as **carbon sinks and assets to be managed in the fight against global warming**.

Crofting is no utopia, however. It has not been cocooned from poor returns from livestock. Sheep numbers in the Western Isles have dropped by a third since 2000. Excessive regulations have closed abattoirs and undermined the role of crofting in providing for household diets. In recent years the Crofters Commission has been accused of failing in its regulatory duties. **The Commission has been complicit in the creation of a market in croft tenancies resulting in croft land becoming a capital asset**. In many townships “plot for sale” signs in the midst of rush infested fields have become familiar sights. As a result the Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting chaired by Professor Mark Shucksmith that reported on May 12th 2008 recommended that the Crofters Commission be abolished in favour of local regulatory bodies.

Nevertheless the crofting ideal remains one way of realising the Biblical vision of a populated countryside, The Scottish government is currently examining proposals to extend crofting to other parts of the country.



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Farming and Supermarkets – A Turning Point?

Last November the Ethical Advisory Group of the Church of England issued a report on the relationship between supermarkets and farmers ‘**Fairtrade begins at home: Supermarkets and the effect on British farming livelihoods**’. They met farmers for whom this relationship had been unequal, even exploitative. Some of you helped them to make the contacts.

The following is an excerpt from the report:

‘The request made to the Church of England’s Ethical Investment Advisory Group to look into the relationship between the major food retailers and farmers came in direct response to concerns from members of the Church of England’s General Synod regarding the doubtful viability of many farming livelihoods given the squeeze on farm gate prices. This review represents a contribution to the ongoing debate around the future of a vibrant, sustainable agricultural sector to which the Church is committed. As part of this review we have found:

- Continuing price pressure on many parts of farming that are putting livelihoods at risk
- There are many complex reasons for the malaise in British farming, but the pursuit of cheap food, coupled with the skewed buying power of the food majors is undoubtedly contributing to the difficulties of the sector.
- The review identifies a number of invisible and pernicious practices that the consumer is largely unaware of, and which have been accepted by farmers as a *fait accompli* as part of the price of doing business
- These practices include labelling that obscures the country of origin of the primary ingredients of some products labelled as British but often only processed or packaged here; flexible contract terms that seldom work to the advantage of the farmer; flexible payment terms that, subject to arbitrary change, have often put farmers to increased cost and financial loss; facilitation payments; deductions and a range of financial inducements paid to the retailer or processor at the farmer’s expense. There is little evidence that retailers share the benefits of promotions with farmers, and much evidence that farmers, in the main, bear the costs

- This report looks particularly at the dairy industry where retailer price competitiveness for a staple product has led to a significant reduction in the number of dairy herds, placing many of those remaining at the margins of economic viability, although more recently there are some positive signs of change
- We conclude that farmers do not seek special treatment, but a genuinely free market that is not skewed towards a few retailers with enormous buying power. There is visible inequality and dysfunction, within the supply chain, which in our view requires attention.

and in his foreword to the report the Bishop of Exeter, Right Reverend Michael Langrish says:

‘This report makes it quite clear that the business practices of the major food retailers have placed considerable stress on the farming community through the use of methods which we believe to be unfair and of which consumers seem to be unaware. Farmers seem to be unwilling to complain or to expose these practices for fear that their produce may be boycotted by the major retailers. It is clear that the Supermarkets Code of Practice is not working although some major retailers are better than others, and those who operate predominantly in the premium and niche markets appear to be far more concerned about paying fair prices as well as caring for the well-being of their suppliers...

‘The landscape and life of Britain are intimately related to the use which we make of the land. Although this has constantly changed over the centuries, we may soon find ourselves living in an age when herds and flocks are no longer seen, and in which virtually the whole population is totally disconnected from any contact with the production of the food which it eats. The link with the land, which is a powerful theme in theology, scripture and folk-lore, may well be lost and with it an essential part of our national heritage and identity’.

In the past the supermarkets themselves have mostly said ‘No one’s complaining so there can be no problem’. Regulatory bodies like the Competition Commission have varied the theme saying that as they have no evidence they can do nothing. Saying that people are too intimidated to come forward has not made a difference. This report, combined with first hand evidence from others in respect of Third World suppliers could make a difference.

The full report is published on the Church’s website:
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ethical/policystatements/fairtrade.pdf>



The King, he govern all;
 The Parson, he pray for all;
 The Lawyer, he plead for all;
 The Ploughman, he pay for all and feed all

Perhaps one or two more lines might complete this Norfolk saying for modern times. Send your suggestions and we will publish the best.



Puzzling times

Christopher Jones

Oil prices have sky rocketed, wheat went up almost to £200 a ton, triple super phosphate has passed £700, people in Haiti and elsewhere have rioted over the price of rice. Those who foresaw none of this are confident in explaining some of the causes. These are complicated events and we have no incisive, all embracing and incontrovertible analysis! However, we have been networking about the food aspects of this situation.

First biofuels - it is asserted that the use of grain in biofuels and the use of land for other fuel crops have raised food prices by diversion of grain and land away from food. Without close and detailed analysis this is hard to substantiate or evaluate. Perhaps in some manifestations the move to biofuels is a bigger threat to tropical forest, than to food supply.

We are told that the rising middle classes, especially in India and China are consuming more meat and therefore raising demand for grain as livestock feed in World markets. Previously, sound sources are saying, that in 2007 China ate almost five times as many broilers as in 1990 and that pork production has doubled and beef consumption has increased seven times. However, while imports of soya etc from Brazil have increased sharply China has remained a net exporter of all grain since the 1996-97 crop year - its 'year ending grain stocks have declined from 88% of annual usage to 28%. But China's production of grains has exceeded its consumption for each of the last three years.' 'India has been a net exporter for 15 of the last 18 years.'*

There has been much less comment on the levels of grain reserves in stock globally or nationally. Neither the EU nor the US has a goodly heap of publicly owned grain and many poorer countries appear to have been persuaded not to keep stocks, but to 'rely on the market place'. More poorer countries depend on imports than 20 years ago.

Whilst all of these things might not create immediate shortage, sufficient to explain recent events, they might lead to anticipation of it.

Investors of all sorts react to anticipation and to the desirability of different avenues for investment. One such avenue is provided by commodities, - provided that their value is likely to rise. 'Commodity index funds' enable investments in a 'basket' of items, so oil and wheat might, for example, be in the same basket. In 2000 it seems that worldwide £4.7 billion was invested in this way, in 2003 £13 billion, in March 2005 £46 billion, at the end of 2007 £175 billion and now £260 billion. Did sudden gloom over some other avenues last year divert huge sums into commodities? What part did this play? It is perhaps significant that the price of bananas, which are somehow outside all this, has been falling in the last year.

What will all this mean for future crop and farm prices?

* Daryll & Ray, Agricultural Policy Analysis Centre, University of Tennessee

A Word from the USA

The Reverend David Ostendorf's experiences with a Farmers' Helpline called Prairie Fire in Iowa, were influential in the setting up of FCN. Perhaps prophetic would be nearer the mark. 'I don't know exactly what will happen to farmers in the UK, but get organised before it does', he kept saying.

He wrote recently: 'The intensity of the farm crisis in the US in the 1980s has become ever-distant history as the structure of agriculture continues to change so dramatically. The industrialisation process seems never to let up, but at the same time we hold out ever-increasing hope for the emerging structure of organic and natural food production, and the growing demand nationwide for good, healthy food from the land and from the hands of producers themselves. The outcome of all this is still unknown and uncertain, but we know that the struggle for family farm production and equity and justice for producers and agricultural workers must carry on and move forward, unabated and stronger than ever before.

'Our own work is, I believe, indicative of the change that has taken place over the past decade or so. Today much of our focus is on immigrant worker issues in the food production and processing sectors. This week one of our staff is in Wisconsin in conversation with farm and church leaders regarding the situation with over 4,000 immigrant workers on the state's dairy farms - a reality unheard of even in recent years, and an indicator of the expanding industrialisation process. The entire food system in the US is now on the backs of low-wage immigrant workers, from the fields to the packing houses to the stores and restaurants, opening new fronts for all of us in the struggle for justice among rural peoples and communities'.

Is this our future also? Should it be?

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