

## Farming Today

### 1. CARE IN CRISIS

No one can dispute that many farming families are facing a crisis. This is acute for small upland farmers, or those in the wetlands of the west of Britain. There have been four years of depressed incomes. All aspects of farming have been in recession at the same time. The pictures of the mass culling of herds and disposing of the carcasses have brought home to everyone, rural and urban alike, the pain of farming today.

For generations there has been a steady decline in mixed farming and for the past 55 years there has been state support, encouraging farmers to intensify production and to drive down prices. This support comes at a price, the first being increased paper work and the second increased use of technology to replace skilled people working on the land. Demands of shoppers for healthy eating, the demise of local shops and the rise of out-of-town supermarkets have created the need for traceable stock and the attendant bureaucracy. The strength of the pound sterling has meant that British agriculture is at a disadvantage when exporting produce. The combination of BSE, swine fever, and Foot and Mouth Disease with poor weather conditions has brought many farmers and their families to abject despair. A survey by the industry magazine, "Farmer's Weekly" of 128 farmers who saw their livestock slaughtered showed that 6% planned to quit agriculture altogether and more than a third will not be restocking their farms. The average age in the industry is 58 and there is real anxiety because farmers cannot pass on a profitable business to sons or daughters. The generations of farming, built up by a family, will have to be abandoned.

It is important to record the caring response of urban neighbours and sense of solidarity that many farming families have experienced from local Methodists and other Christians. There have been many expressions of gratitude for the special prayers for farming families and the collections around the Christian Churches for funds such as the Addington Fund, to bring immediate relief to suffering families. There has been much appreciation expressed for the work of ministers, rural chaplains and the ministry of the Arthur Rank Centre during this crisis. The 'Green Ribbon' campaign associated with Rogation Sunday has raised the awareness of congregations throughout the country and has given further opportunity to pray and demonstrate commitment to the people and the livestock that are suffering. In the last two years there have been clear expressions of support for the plight of farming families from the Methodist Conference.

The Rural Stress Information Network has been joined in partnership by MAFF and, together with nine other welfare organisations, they are coordinating the pastoral support for farming families across the country. Even though these families may be isolated by physical geography or by restrictions on movements because of disease, they are aware that they do not have to face their problems on their own. Farming families can be linked together in effective support networks that maintain effective pastoral contacts.

***Practical ways to continue this support are:***

- Affirm the people who are farming and value their work over the years in the production of safe food and the management of the rural landscape.
- Listen to farming families and support them through the continuing changes in agriculture.
- Act on God's calling for a just stewardship of the resources of the earth.

## **2. EXTRACTION AND CONSUMPTION**

The pressure of market forces has in many instances dehumanised farming. Competition has created stereotypes, branded other farmers as the opposition and created a win-lose culture. Farmers are lumped together, supermarkets are considered equal despite different policies on fair trading. Families, shopping with clear discernment for the well-being of their lives and the lives of others, become mere consumers. Farming must be seen as more than extraction and the buying public more than consumers.

Methodists celebrate religious values based on the free grace of God revealed in the Trinity. Methodist religious values include being in fellowship with God in the stewardship of the resources of the planet; extending this fellowship to others who are working for a just and sustainable society; deepening this fellowship so that it is more than self-interest and includes sharing faith and story; expanding the fellowship to include all who may be marginalized or excluded by it. When these values are applied to farming and shopping, the relationship between the farmer and the land is not one of extraction, but of replenishment and sustenance and the relationship between the farmer and the shopper is restored.

There are imaginative schemes being developed that are moving towards these religious values. Farmers' markets have risen from two in 1998 to 300 today. Farmers bring what they have grown, reared or made and sell direct to the public. The farmers come from a defined region to avoid the produce travelling miles. They bring with them the pleasure of buying fresh, seasonable, local food and the social interaction of a market. Joan Hardingham at Alder Carr Farm, Needham Market, Suffolk set up one of the first farmers' markets in 1998. Farmers' markets can nurture producers and can help them financially by increasing income.

Another way of reducing food miles and the links in the food chain is through farmers' box schemes. A local producer contracts to supply a household or a group of neighbours with a box of homegrown produce each week. This is delivered to the door and provides seasonable, local food for families.

Organic farming provides a way of keeping the balance naturally between the soil, growing and selling on to suppliers. Supermarkets have some stocks of organic food available. Sustainable agricultural techniques are being encouraged both here and round the world. Traditional agriculture has natural possibilities of soil regeneration and control of predators. These may have been ignored because modern techno-farming is assumed to be the most productive way of feeding the world.

***Possible action based on religious values include:***

- Shortening the links in the food chain.
- Exploration of alternative ways of agriculture.
- Developing choices for people around the world.
- Personal contacts with people in farming, processing and selling.

### **3. THE FUTURE AFTER FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE**

When farmers suffer, the whole of the rural economy suffers. Lots of things suddenly fall out of place as the dynamic jigsaw called the countryside is taken to pieces with Foot and Mouth Disease. The haulage industry, agricultural engineering, rural artists and craftspeople, the village economy, rural tourism, are all disadvantaged. Urban people lose the right to roam; the future for farming and the countryside is suddenly different.

Every effort has been made during the crisis to improve the relationships between urban and rural people. Commentators on all sides have presented the future as one future, not a rural future, distinct from an urban future. This approach is in line with the Government's desire to present the rural and urban white papers in relation to each other, as the Methodist Conference is doing this year. The hope is that there will be one national debate about the future of farming and the countryside, with many voices being heard and many options proposed from all concerned.

The first thing to remember in the debate is that the countryside is very complex. The agricultural industry is diverse. Foot and Mouth Disease did not affect all farmers. Cumbria, Devon and Galloway were the hardest hit. Farms have a variety of economic needs, from the arable farms of East Anglia, intensive chicken or pig rearing, or fruit farm management in Kent.

The Common Agricultural Policy is in need of reform and subsidies need to be phased out over a period of time. Germany and France are also looking for reforms so this will help the process. The results of abandoning subsidies in New Zealand are now economically sound and agriculture is doing well, but it meant two or three years of hardship.

The Government suggests that subsidies should be directed towards conservation. Farmers feel that conservation needs a profitable business to finance it, or funding derived from other sources. Others feel that farmers should protect the land as a responsibility for the privilege of farming or land ownership. Some feel that when farmers leave the industry the land should revert to wilderness so that upland Britain returning to scrub would increase the ecological diversity. Meanwhile, lowland Britain is threatened by urban sprawl. As agriculture declines there is an increase in the rural population. Four million new houses are required in the next twenty years.

It is important to assert the prime purpose of farming. Should it be for food production? If it is food production, should the enterprise be extensive and large-scale or small-scale and diverse? How can small farms be defended?

Farming is one part of the rural structure and should be sustained in a dynamic way for the future. Thriving farms can be part of the diversity of the countryside along with wilderness, forestry and ecology. There is also a need to re-assert the claims of tourists and visitors for recreation and access.

The future can be decided only by an engagement between farmers and their local community and between rural and urban people. There has to be an exchange of ideas and questions with everyone listening as well. The voices of local farmers are especially important for they have been the guardians of the countryside in their locality for many generations. Everyone has to be involved in the decision-making, to create a future of diversity.

The Methodist Connexion has a role in this debate. Through the Churches' Rural Committee and Jenny Carpenter, the Rural Officer-Consultant, in conjunction with The Revd Dr Gordon Gatward and the Arthur Rank Centre, information is available to increase the effectiveness of the public debate.

Theologians can provide the background concerning religious values that need to be used by Christians as they engage in the debate. Local Methodists can encourage the debate in their own communities, using their premises for drawing the interested parties together and using their skills as house group leaders or pastoral carers to enable people to listen and learn from one another.

This paper has focused on farming today. It has deliberately omitted references to the needs of rural communities: the provision of affordable housing for rural young people; appropriate transport, schools, shops, post offices and infrastructure in villages. The Rural White Paper deals with these items. There is another sector of the rural economy that is not discussed here: the tourist industry that involves a total spend of £64bn and employs 1.85 billion people. None of these factors may be considered in isolation. The countryside is one. However, it is important for Methodists to show that they are alongside the farming community at this time of radical change and that they are giving time to hear the voices of farmers, as well as informing themselves about the issues. In addition to prayer, Methodists can consider how their relationships with local farmers may shape their life style choices.

***Methodists can consult on the future of farming by:***

- Enthusiastic engagement with the national debate on the future of farming.
- Empathising with the needs of small farmers.
- Encouraging the phased reduction of subsidies.
- Enquiring about the choice of possibilities of land management in the locality.
- Enabling the voices of local, regional and national interests to be heard and valued.
- Employing Christian values in the discussions.
- Evaluating the proposals for the locality.

Farmers in East Anglia are expecting informed support from the Methodist Conference at Ipswich to help them cope with the depression of these times. Is it enough to say that Methodists are with them in

the struggle, or should the support be seen to involve commitment to specific responsible actions for change?

***Methodists can promote the work of farming families by:***

- Patronising Farmers' Markets or Box Schemes.
- Campaigning for local supermarkets to stock more local produce.
- Purchasing only seasonable goods.
- Expecting to pay more for the privilege of purchasing local produce, like purchases of many fairly-traded goods.

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