

Missing at the table **Brother David Andrews, CSC**

A Place at God's Table: Food Policy for a Healthy World
Ecumenical Advocacy Days, April 5-8, 2013

I was just in Rome for two days of meetings as a member of the Finance Committee for the Civil Society Mechanism for the World Committee on Food Security. And what we did over April 2-3 is look at the finances available to us by governments and other donors like Oxfam. We looked at proposals from Asia, Africa, Latin America and North America to see how we can fund local and regional meetings throughout the world like this one, looking at food issues in those localities. We developed the funding in response to those proposal on how local groups – pastoralists, fisherfolk, farmers, forestfolk—can meet together to strategize about how to make our food system more just and more in line with a human right to food.

Since I was there a few days early I was able to be at St. Peter's for the election of "Pope Pancho." True to his name, he rode around on the popemobile without a top and sides and greeted people and welcomed the lame and the poor. It's a good example for us and was a good way to spend Easter before meeting for two days to talk about how we can fund these projects for people to meet like this.

We're talking about *A Place at God's Table: Food Policy for a Healthy World* and looking at the question of who's missing.

I was a member of the Sacred Foods Project, launched in July 2005. The project was housed in ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, and worked in partnership with [Faith in Place](#), [the Food Alliance](#), the [Islamic Society of North America](#), the [National Catholic Rural Life Conference](#), the [National Council of Churches](#), the [Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#) and [the Shalom Center](#) as well as other faith-based institutions, businesses and nonprofit organizations. We looked at the Abrahamic tradition to tease out what we had in common in terms of a food systems agenda. We developed together eight principles for the food system I'd like to use as a framework to situate our question of who is at the table and who is missing.

Preface: The web of life

We celebrate God's creation of a self-sustaining web of life in which plants, animals, land, water, air, and human beings are interwoven and need to be understood as interdependent.

There are many relationships in this web that can heal or damage the web itself. Among these, food production is one of the more significant forces. So we must choose ways of producing food that protect and heal the fragile web of life.

Dimension 1. Growing food in ways that protect and heal the web of life

Food production, as one of the more significant forces in the natural world, affects the delicate balance of plants, animals, human beings, land, water and air – interdependent in seeking sustenance and survival. Farming and grazing together occupy one quarter of the world's lands and are the leading cause of deforestation and loss of natural lands. In order to maintain this balance for future generations, we human beings must choose to produce our food in ways that protect the web of life, preserve the living spaces that other life-forms need, and learn to use methods that return vibrant health to our soil and water. Some strands of our traditions focus on finding ways to produce food for an ever growing human population without continuing to encroach on natural and sensitive areas, and others focus on limiting human populations. Our work is not finished; it's only in the bud.

Dimension 2. Humane treatment of animals

All our traditions agree that animals must be treated humanely and their suffering minimized. Some strands of our traditions focus on using animals for food through methods of maintenance and slaughter that minimize suffering; others suggest vegetarianism.

Confined Animal Feeding Operations: I served for two years on the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production and travelled throughout the U.S. looking at the treatment of animals for food production. I serve on a faith advisory committee for the Humane Society of the United States. With Food and Water Watch and other NGOs, I do not support or the cruel and inhumane treatment of animals in confined animal feeding operations where poultry are caged, beef cattle are housed in disgusting feedlots, pigs are raised in massive cement prisons. All are treated with antibiotics to encourage growth and to keep them healthy in otherwise unhealthy conditions. This is a way of treating animals so scandalous that some states are prohibiting photos from being taken of these animals. Nineteen states have food defamation laws which say that one cannot criticize the food that comes from animals raised this way.

Increasingly in the way we treat animals we are turning to science. We're on the verge of approving in this country for food genetically engineered salmon which now contain genetic material from eels so they can grow twice as fast and twice as large. They're being spawned in Canada, produced in Panama, and shipped to this country. They're being created to supplant nature. FWW has asked companies like Walmart not to put them on their shelves. They should at least be labeled so we can make our own choices. We have a right to know how our food is being developed.

It is a scandal that agriculture is concentrated in form and in shape in the hands of just a few companies. Over the years the USDA and Department of Justice have combined forces in a historic alignment to challenge the antitrust implications using the 90-year old Packers & Stockyards Administration.

I participated in four out of five GIPSA workshops around the country looking at the antitrust implications of our food system on production and on eaters. I support a Farm Bill that challenges anti-trust concentration in the food system and that recognized and deals with the Agency Capture of the USDA whether by Monsanto or others and the United Nations by the global compact and the world water council. The new effort early in the Obama administration to confront anti-trust in seeds, livestock, retail, etc., was a bold move that got abandoned once big money got involved.

I was at a poultry meeting in Alabama where justice department lawyer Christine Varney handed her business card to a frightened poultry grower. "If anybody threatens you, come to me." Well Christine Varney has resigned, as has the chief administrator of the USDA's anti-trust effort Dudley Butler (the head of the Packers and Stockworkers Administration), as have all the other significant leaders in this effort. The forces of wealth and corruption have won.

Now at the USDA, one of the companies that was under scrutiny on seeds, namely Monsanto, has made it to the White House. They had recently a meeting with the USDA at the White House. Recently the Supreme Court is reviewing a case of a farmer who is suing Monsanto, but it's not going any place to deal with justice. The Supreme Court is leaning towards giving Monsanto its head. We are in a challenging time when it comes to antritrust, livestock production, and the concentration of food production in the hands of a few.

Our work of reform is in the bud.

Dimension 3. Protecting the integrity and diversity of life

The ways in which we produce food must respect the integrity and diversity of the world's plants and animals, as well as taking active steps to prevent the extinction of animal species and plant. We need to protect the biodiversity of the earth and its plants and animals. Some strands of our traditions emphasize concern for the integrity of the genetic line of plants and animals; others strongly encourage putting considerable effort into increasing food production and developing the health-giving properties of foods. There is a lot of focus on nutrition these days, some speak of Scaling Up Nutrition, others have rediscovered the health benefits of wild foods, grasses and plants not eaten by mainstream eaters but are learning to foster a new awareness.

Our work is not finished; it is only in the bud.

We need a climate-friendly Farm Bill and to work on the conservation programs and to support them; one that encourages the diversity of species, not their extinction.

Dimension 4. No one should go hungry

All our traditions share a strong commitment that no one should go hungry at the end of the day. This applies especially to the poor and at times of famine. Everyone should have access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally customary food. As Congressman Jim McGovern says in the film *A Place at the Table*, "we all have a right to food." Food as a human right was developed in the 1940s by the Roosevelt administration. Why have we been shy about asserting it?

Each local community and the world-wide human community acting in concert share the responsibility for ending hunger and famine. Our traditions present a range of opinions about how best to do this. Most strands strongly encourage very localized and decentralized approaches (e.g. gleaning); some strands describe highly centralized approaches (e.g. Joseph's solution to famine in Egypt). It seems likely that both approaches will be taken in today's world, though the question remains whether it is better that we aim policy toward one over the other.

I attended a meeting recently in Philadelphia called "food for the cities"; many of our cities and our rural areas in this country have embarked upon such a project. We need to encourage it. We need to have a zero hunger approach and recognize the human right to food. Fifty million people hungry in this country, a billion around the world, have a right to food. We should recognize and endorse that right and not be concerned about the implications of the right to food in terms of our domestic political life.

We have not recognized the human rights approach in regard to social and economic rights but those rights have been recognized by many countries around the world now for 60 years. It's become part of the cultural component of a global understanding and implicitly in my mind it becomes part our culture and part of our way of life.

We have much to do to seek the right to food. So much is unfinished; our work is in the bud.

Eating is a Moral Act: At the National Catholic Rural Life Conference I was part of a campaign that is called Eating is a Moral Act. The campaign includes some cards articulating values for eaters. One includes a picture of a farmer, [showing] a close-up of a farmer's hands.

He is wearing work gloves. The hands are pressed together palm to palm and he holds them at waist level.

You do not see the farmer's face, only his hands. Wrapped around his gloved hands are strands of twisted barbed wire – like a rope – binding them like those of a prisoner or a slave. As I said, this photograph is part of a campaign addressed not to producers but to “eaters.” It is an informational campaign meant to stimulate thinking about issues of justice in the production of our food and the people who labor to produce it.

The campaign attempts to open our eyes to see what we otherwise ignore: To take note of deficiencies of justice in the midst of mounting riches for the few.....

To take note of the hard work of farming, the dangerous working of fishing, the tedious work of processing ... the poorly supported work of waiting, and washing, and serving ... all those raw and unsettling realities not reflected in the soft glow of the candle light in fine restaurants; human realities blanched pale in the glaring convenience of fast food, economic oligopolies glossed over by plastic packaging by the handful of companies who control our eating at bargain prices and bargain basement wages.

“Look, take a good hard look at what you are overlooking!”

This is the cry of all prophetic voices throughout the history of faith: to see what is otherwise ignored! Though it is difficult to admit, we all have this tendency to overlook essential elements of justice. Whether it is the food we eat or the clothes we wear or the services we use we all have a tendency to take our comforts for granted. And on the other side of this otherwise innocuous tendency comes the surprised reaction when we are confronted with words warning us about the long-term results of our lack of attention.

This is our habit and it leads to sin, the sin of overlooking the wages paid, the pollution made, the plans laid by the rich, and those for whom the buck never stops.

Here in the U.S. and around the globe a few huge companies control much of the food system and the public policies and politicians. They've defeated the Obama Administration's attempts to enforce antitrust activity. They have forced Lisa Jackson out of the EPA. And we've recently learned that Kathleen Merrigan is leaving the USDA. She is the Deputy Secretary at USDA and one of the 100 most powerful women in the world according to *Time* magazine, winner of the James Beard Award for promoting sustainable food systems, the founder of Know your Farmer, Know your Food, of the food hub approach that targets support for small and medium size farmers.

Gerry Hagstrom, an agriculture reporter, has written recently on Kathleen Merrigan's departure from the USDA at the end of April. He has written what I believe can be termed a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” She is “leaving” – did she resign? Or was she fired? It is not clear. What is clear is that her focus on small and medium farms, food hubs, organics are all at risk and Monsanto is in the USDA and the White House in a new way! I'm thinking along with Gerry Hagstrom that the forces of corruption are winning and the forces of sustainability are losing.

OCM has published a study on the revolving door, men and women who go from corporations to the department of agriculture and back again, from being enforcers of regulations to the ones being regulated. Are we surprised that the regulations support the big and harm the small and medium sized ranchers? Are we surprised that government fails to enforce the laws that are on the books? Should we be amazed that the regulations of the WTO are written for and by large food companies? Most of the world's farmers are small farmers, over a billion of them. Most of those are women. Are these facts part of the global calculus for food sovereignty and sustainability?

We would lessen the global impact of the huge food cartels and increase a global people's agenda. Will you support us in working to develop and sustain grassroots partnerships in the global food system? Food and Water Watch and others are working on food sovereignty through a network of action, advocacy and education.

Some would have us begin reciting the soothing mantras of neo-liberal doctrine: "It's a global economy," our Davos economic forum participants tell us, "free markets benefit everyone." And their automatic ritual suggest that we ignore disturbing reports of the 800 million who go hungry every day around the world and pass over such facts that, since the passage of NAFTA, the working poor in Mexico has climbed from 40 percent to 60 percent of the population.

We know many such chants.

Here is another one: "The low wages of the maquiladoras simply reflect the lower standard of living in that country." It's a comforting verse. It numbs the gnawing fact that the average wage of \$5.00 a day in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico must buy food that costs the same as across the river in El Paso, Texas.

We ignore many things at home as well. We ignore the growing poverty in the rural U.S. with 50 million people on SNAP. We are ignorant of the loss of over 300,000 family farms in the last 20 years. We are aware of the lack of fairness in court rulings against the beef check off, the bias of our Supreme Court especially its five Catholic members to the principles of greed of Ayn Rand rather than the compassion of Jesus; in People United and in Monsanto rulings, the overturning of jury decisions by judges in the Pickett case.

"Take a look at what you'd rather ignore!" But it's so distressing to be reminded of this, you say. It's so frustrating to be aware of injustice and not be able to do anything about it. Indeed, what is the purpose of this criticism? What can sincere people do in a world where injustice exists and will always exist?

Why bring up these unpleasant facts? These are valid protests. This is meant to be program of joy and peace.

Eating is a moral act, and sometimes a religious act. Yet, the gratitude for holy food and the salvation it brings is fully expressed only when we remember that unleavened bread was first eaten by slaves on the run and the cup of some drink is a cup of suffering.

Just as I believe in bread and wine transformed, so are we transformed ... transformed into people of compassion, people who see what others overlook, people who can begin to trace the vague outlines of a prophetic vision of justice and peace.

We can be artisans of a new humanity and defenders of nature we can recognize that eating is a moral

act, indeed a spiritual act, and a grand table can be set. A table that reflects a diverse landscape where food is a common thread of unity where the table includes those now missing. Where bankers sit next to farmers, border guards converse with the undocumented and ranchers share toasts with environmentalists. A table that celebrates sustainability and lives out a vision rooted in spirituality.

Where work gloves lie next to linen napkins, hands are scrubbed, feet are washed, thirst is quenched, hunger satisfied and there's no hint of injustice, no whisper of enslavement ... no sign of barbed wire anywhere!

Eating is a moral act. Our tables need to include those who've been excluded. Our talk needs to include our farmer, and ranchers, our families, their communities, our environment, our landscape, our countryside, religious and moral values. We are what we eat, by our choices we shape our world. We are in a new age with new possibilities. We are at a time where the public insists on authenticity, integrity, honesty, truthfulness! Let us lift up these virtues and values for our age and help restore America to its moral purpose, to be a city on a hill, holding close to the values of land, community, democracy, and family.

Increasingly scholars are giving a new attention to food in an economic, social and development framework. Food is not like any other economic entity; it is dependent on weather, seasons, natural biological processes. It is not like mechanical production of any type. Food has a special purpose: it feeds people, keeps them alive. Food is a necessity for life, not a luxury. It is essential. Food has come to be evaluated as so important in the order of goods that there is acknowledged a right to food in recent world food summits. The United States is one of the few countries in the world that formally does not accept the idea of a right to food. But there have developed approaches to food security at the community and household levels that build upon the notion that every community has the right to food and the right to a nutritionally beneficial, culturally appropriate food system. Some of these approaches do not require the acceptance of the notion of the right to food legally or constitutionally in order to appropriate strategies to secure food provisioning as an essential element in the community and in the economy. The United Nations has a special rapporteur on the right to food who has articulated a framework on the right to food:

"The right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear" (E/CN.4/2001/53, para. 14). – Jean Ziegler, Special Rapporteur on the right to food

The right to food is not just a right to a particular good, like individual food products; it is a right to a good of order, a system. The United Nations Special Rapporteur talks about a "collective ... life" which is the life of the community considered as a whole.

In their articulation of "food sovereignty" as part of their perspective on food security and the right to food, Via Campesina (a network of peasant farmers and fishers) states the following:

In order to guarantee the independence and food sovereignty of all of the world's peoples, it is essential that food is produced through diversified, community based production systems. Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to

which they want to be self reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets, and; to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production. (See website: www.viacampesina.org)

Dimension 5. Fairness toward and empowerment of workers *[This theme will be taken up by Rev. Michael Livingston, National Policy Director for Interfaith Worker Justice.]* All our traditions agree that workers must be treated fairly, justly and humanely. One out of every six people works to provide the food we eat – in the fields and in food transport, in restaurants and food preparation, and in food stores. We affirm their right to decent incomes, working conditions, and to organize themselves. Our work is in the bud, so much left to do.

Dimension 6: Responsible and ethical forms of business

All our traditions require that we act honestly, fairly, to the benefit of others, and in accordance with the ethical teachings of our faith traditions when dealing with customers, employees, partners, and the communities in which we conduct business. These relationships must be accessible to public scrutiny and accountability. We have to avoid giving allegiance to campaigns of blue washing and green washing, including such activities by NGOs who may unfortunately align themselves with unscrupulous business enterprises. The specifics of how we conduct responsible and ethical business relationships, as well as the meaning and implications of accountability to the public, may be reflected in different ways by the various strands in our traditions, not blue washing or green washing but the real food challenge which must be reflected in our advocacy.

Dimension 7. Food as an aspect of spirituality

All our traditions affirm that food is an element in spiritual celebration and experience. Whenever we eat, we consciously affirm that eating is a sacred, spiritual practice which celebrates the delicate interplay of plants, animals and people, land, air, and water that makes this possible and we commit ourselves again to maintaining this creation. All our traditions affirm that specific times and practices of great religious significance, such as Passover, the Mass, and Eid al-Adha, include food as a central element. Some of our traditions affirm that for religious reasons, certain foods may be forbidden to eat and others encouraged, either all the time or at specific times.

Spirituality: What is spirituality? It is a steepening, like soaking tea leaves. It is a steepening of the mind and heart, body and soul. We are the leaves, the bodies immersed in a broth of mystery, absorbing the way of nature and the way of transcendence.

Spirituality is a way of living. It is an attitude, a motivation, a feeling practiced and a practiced feeling. A feeling practiced becomes a habitual way of feeling. And a practiced feeling points to the recurrence as well as the deepening that comes with a process of valuation, recurrent integration, and sustained conviction. Spirituality is not the end or purpose of living, the goal for which one lives. It is a manner, a style, process or method by which one lives in light of the goal. It is the stuff of character by which one creates character. Spirituality shows itself in the seasoning, which accompanies one's way of being... like tea, one can be steeped! It is the steepening which gives character to one's spirituality. How are you steeped? Are you steeped into some tradition, a way of life and being which has informed your thoughts, your words, your choices and actions? How have you steeped yourself? Lightly or thoroughly?

One can be steeped deeply or weakly as tea can be. Steepening is a matter of the mind and heart, body

and behavior. It is a deepening, like a descent into a cool, refreshing spring. It is a thickening, like the fashioning of a community. A community can be profound as well as superficial, it can be intimate in its deep ecology and deep economy or it can be all surface. Community is the achievement of common meaning ... what meanings are shared among the congregants? Are they developed and fashioned into a depth or are they undeveloped and only surface ... like strangers passing in the night? Like a veneer that is removed with ease, that doesn't get absorbed for longevity and sustainability.

Dimension 8. Reflection on our actions and impact

The rhythm of action and reflection, renewed action and renewed reflection, is encouraged in our traditions in such forms as Sabbaths, Ramadan, and Lent, as well as other holidays when we refrain from our daily work and reflect on our roles in the web of life. Meaningful observance of these occasions can be expanded to include reflection on and assessment of the impact of human activity on the integrity of the web of life. In different ways, our traditions may choose to encourage reviews, similar to "environmental impact assessments," when considering whether to endorse new approaches to providing food.

Some version of what is called the "precautionary principle," analogous to the medical code's "first do no harm," could be taken into account.

We need to go beyond cost-benefit analysis to deeper and more holistic methods of computing risk. We don't seem to take seriously the extent of the destruction we've already sewn. Hannah Arendt once talked about the banality of evil; we get used to violence and accept it as part of our daily life: the drone-driven mentality of seeking a "hands-off" method of dealing death and judgment; terminator seeds; technological methods of breeding and producing animals giving us, in some regions of the country, fecal floods. This is the brave new world the government has given us.

At the USDA on April 29 there will be an open meeting on the G8's approach to food production. I encourage you to look at the USDA website and go to that meeting.

I'd like to conclude with a little philosophy and poetry.

In 1980, Alasdair MacIntyre wrote in *After Virtue* that the barbarians have been ruling us for a long time. We have philosophers of the soil and earth like Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Judy Wick, Nicolette Hahn Niman, Kathleen Merrigan, and others, who in MacIntyre's book are identified as being new Saint Benedicts taking us beyond the current dark age of corporate control: "A crucial turning point in [the decline of the Roman empire] occurred when men and women of goodwill turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead ... was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness... This is what the food sovereignty movement is about. The table of the Lord is one at which all have a place. [W]e too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."

Think to yourself who are the persons leading this effort in every community there are leaders, inspirers, occupiers, champions of the poor and dispossessed. My work at the FAO is to amplify the voices of the

peasants, fisherfolk, forest people, pastoralists who have solutions to global hunger, climate change, the financialization of nature, the plundering of earth – who should have a place at the table.

I like to emphasize the priority of the poetic vision. Poet Denise Levertov says that we've not gone down to the sea quite yet; she sees the possibility of hope in a new vision. Matthew Arnold once called poets the "unacknowledged, real legislators" for our race. Read Denise Levertov's poem *Beginners*, dedicated to the memory of Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla:

*"From too much love of living,
Hope and desire set free,
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea—"*

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
—we have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy,

only begun to envision
how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt
we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us

if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.

Resiliency is possible in this new Dark Age, and this little light of mine is shining with those of many others of these 10 or more years of the Ecumenical Advocacy Days articulating the globalization of solidarity and the contours of the thousand tasks yet to be accomplished. Let us join together in the work of justice and peace, and the struggle for compassion. I trust that we will do this. Thank you, and God bless you.