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# Confronting the Global Food Crisis

## How the church is responding

*by Noelle Boughton*

**T**he global food crisis means it is time for Canadians to consider how their food and agricultural policies impact the world, and what they can do about it.

“This is now a crisis that is global in scope,” says Gary Kenny, the United Church’s Program Coordinator for Southern Africa and Emergency Response. “We’re hearing increasingly from our partners about how they are affected by it, so we need to encourage people to learn as much as they can.”

The primary way the United Church is responding to the situation is ecumenically through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, which supports food aid and food security programs, as well as advocacy for policy change. The Foodgrains Bank is a partnership of 15 church-based agencies that works to end hunger in the global South. The United Church has been a member for 25 years.

This fall, the United Church will decide what more it can do to respond to the crisis. Kenny notes that the



United Church's only food-related policy is on genetically modified foods, so it needs to decide if it requires a food policy in this area.

Kenny says he plans to gather an appropriate group of people "to review the situation and determine if we need to set policy on this, or if it's enough to work with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank."

Concern about the global food supply made headlines this year amid reports of rising food prices and dwindling food stocks. Over the past year, there were food riots in Austria, Egypt, Hungary, Mexico, Morocco, Senegal, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. Russia and Pakistan introduced food rationing for the first time in decades, and India banned the export of most rice to conserve shrinking stocks.

Much has been written about the crisis, but Stuart Clark, Senior Policy Advisor for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, says several factors caused it:

- Food production has not kept pace with consumption, so extra stocks are dwindling.
- Rising energy prices are driving up food production and transportation costs.
- Climate change reduced some countries' production—Australia was a key exporter before its drought—and other countries began imposing controls on the food they export.
- Grain consumption is rapidly increasing. The Chinese and Indian middle classes have developed a taste for grain-fed meat. Darrin Qualman, the National Farmers Union's Director of Research, says the world also adds the equivalent of a North American population every six years.

- Food now is subject to speculation on international commodity markets. The International Federation of Agricultural Producers says speculation accounts for up to 30 percent of food price increases over the past two years.
- Increasingly, crops are being grown for biofuels instead of food.
- Most of the world's hungry, including small-scale farmers, now get their food through the market rather than growing it themselves.

The crisis has had a huge impact. In June, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN) reported that food prices climbed 52 percent between 2007 and 2008 and 862 million of the world's people are now afflicted by hunger. The organization noted that the number of hungry people increased by about 50 million in 2007 alone as a result of high food prices. It also says that to reduce the number of undernourished people and meet growing demands, global food production must double by 2050. Most of that growth must occur in countries in the global South where most of the hungry live and 95 percent of the population increase will occur.

Governments and aid agencies have responded to concerns by increasing support. This year, the UN's World Food Programme, a major vehicle for emergency food assistance and overseas development, asked donor countries for an extra \$755 million in food aid. This represented a 30 percent increase in its budget. Canada dedicated another \$50 million—\$45 million to the UN food program and \$5 million to the Canadian Foodgrains Bank—bringing its 2008 contribution to the UN program to \$230 million.

## How to Respond

**If you, or your congregation, are interested in addressing this issue, here are some ideas:**

- Host a potluck dinner and discuss food policies in your home, workplace, or congregation.
- Learn about Canada's food and agricultural policies, and the organizations influencing them. For a small fee, you can join the National Farmers Union or Food Secure Canada, a new group of people and organizations working for national and global food security. (See "For More Information.")
- Visit the Canadian Foodgrains Bank's website, [www.foodgrainsbank.ca](http://www.foodgrainsbank.ca). It offers educational and fundraising opportunities, a Food Justice Network for engaging in hunger issues, and opportunities to donate money and grain, host overseas guests, and travel to the Foodgrains Bank's project sites.
- Support initiatives to change Canada's national and international policies. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank is encouraging people to contact their Members of Parliament to advocate that Canada adopt fairer trading practices in its international relationships.
- Pray. Deborah Scott of the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development's Pan African Program in Kenya suggests we pray "not only so more of us can go to bed at night and not be hungry, but that we can find the wisdom of how we develop trade structures and how we farm."

Clark says the extra \$5 million that the Canadian Foodgrains Bank received topped up the five-year, \$20 million agreement that it signed with the Canadian International Development Agency last year. The Foodgrains Bank now provides \$21 million in food aid and \$4 million for food security. It also collects donations of cash and grain for its work, which focuses on education, public policy, and working with overseas partners to end hunger. Clark notes that it sends food and money to help people in the global South secure food and develop food security by developing their own sustainable sources of food, but it also helps their local communities develop advocacy capacity so they can negotiate the best national policies.

People overseas are also addressing the situation. Deborah Scott is a policy advisor for the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development's (ACORD) Pan African Program in Kenya. She says that while Africans are "facing the brunt of the food crisis," ACORD—an African-led international alliance that works in 17 African countries—does more than provide relief. It helps people achieve food security. ACORD also encourages the African Union's leaders to support local agriculture by meeting their commitment to dedicate 10 percent of their national budgets to local agriculture, and honouring this in their international trade agreements. Scott says this is key, since North American and European farmers' subsidies have allowed them to export grain to Africa and destabilize African agriculture.

"We need to get people to talk about their governments' policies because it does impact how life is here," Scott says. "We need to support agriculture that is rooted in its local community and environment, and that is done as sustainably as possible."

Canadian farm organizations have a mixed response to the crisis. When Bob Friesen, President of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, returned from the 38th World Farmers' Congress in Warsaw, he said its members from the global South noted that "there's all kinds of food around; it's just not being distributed properly." The congress asked countries in the global South to increase their investments in agricultural development.

Qualman from the National Farmers Union believes this crisis repudiates the rhetoric that nations in the global North can feed the world. "The food crisis is a jolt that what we're doing and how we've organized the world isn't working," he says. "This is very positive for farmers because it means we must return to food and agricultural policies that value food, soil, farmers, and communities. We need to return farmers and people who eat to the centre of policy."

Clark of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank notes two key points as he reflects on the crisis. First, in a world where food is abundant but many go hungry, he says education is more than asking people to provide for others. "It calls for us to be transformed," he says.

Second, he notes, "as the church, it's our responsibility to reflect on this: What does the kingdom of God look like in this situation?" While he believes small-scale agriculture will be an essential component, he adds that "we're on the cusp—of where we were in agriculture and the uncertainty of what's to come." He suggests that Canadians begin to make choices about their future while they still have options.

—Noelle Boughton is a Toronto writer and a regular contributor to Mandate.

## Some Websites for More Information

- [www.acordinternational.org](http://www.acordinternational.org)**: ACORD International
- [www.cfa-fca.ca](http://www.cfa-fca.ca)**: Canadian Federation of Agriculture
- [www.foodgrainsbank.ca](http://www.foodgrainsbank.ca)**: Canadian Foodgrains Bank
- [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)**: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- [www.foodsecurecanada.org](http://www.foodsecurecanada.org)**: Food Secure Canada
- [www.ifap.org](http://www.ifap.org)**: International Federation of Agricultural Producers
- [www.nfu.ca](http://www.nfu.ca)**: National Farmers Union

## Supporting Farmers in Zimbabwe

**In Zimbabwe**, Christian Care is teaching farmers about conservation farming. Its efforts are making a difference in a country hard hit by climate change and political instability, where three-quarters of its 13 million population depend on agriculture for a living.

“I think we can offer a long-term solution,” says the Rev. Forbes Matonga, Director of Christian Care in Harare.

The United Church of Canada is working through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank to help Christian Care, its partner agency. The agency started teaching conservation farming methods in two districts and neighbouring farmers soon copied the program.

Christian Care encourages farmers to use manure, not fertilizer, and seeds that reproduce rather than genetically modified seeds that don't. “That way ordinary people will have control over the future,” says Matonga. “It also improves yields and is environmentally friendly, so it will produce enough food for their household and preserve our environment.”

Christian Care is the Zimbabwe Council of Churches' development arm. It has 27 Protestant members and does humanitarian and agricultural development work. “The United Church of Canada is one of our oldest partners,”

Matonga says. “It is almost 20 years now that we have had funding with them.”

The United Church is investing \$650,000 of its Canadian Foodgrains Bank equity in Christian Care food aid and food security as part of a three-year, \$7.2 million project that ends next July. While the United Church is the lead organization, other Canadian Foodgrains Bank members are also contributing, and the federal government's Canadian International Development Agency is matching the funds on a 4:1 basis, providing four dollars for every one.

Zimbabwe has two million percent inflation and many farms sit idle because of government land reforms, according to the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development's Pan African Program in Kenya. There is 85 percent unemployment and 4.1 million rural poor need food aid.

But what Matonga most wants Christian Care's Canadian supporters to know is that Zimbabweans are a hard-working people who are dealing with the changes. “Zimbabwe continues to be a hopeful nation,” he says, “and that is encouraging.”

—Noelle Boughton