

Rx for a FAILING FOOD SYSTEM

The church
can help
bridge the
gap between
rural and
urban Canada

by Christopher Guly

IT'S CLEAR THAT OUR CURRENT FOOD SYSTEM IS NOT SUSTAINABLE.

“Around the world, in the wake of recent sudden price spikes in international markets, governments are looking to their own food systems for a more predictable supply,” explains Stuart Clark, Senior Policy Advisor of the Winnipeg-based Canadian Foodgrains Bank, of which The United Church of Canada is a member.

“In Canada, the issue is that farmers need better access to local consumers so that Canadians can better value the work of those who produce our food.”

United Church members are trying to help that happen.



These boys were among the 7,000 who showed up at the Great Potato Giveaway held to draw attention to farmland being lost to urban development in Edmonton.



Lance Johnson

Last year, the church's 40th General Council passed a resolution on agricultural land and local food security that called on congregations to foster connections between their local food producers and consumers, and to understand the process of food production "from seed to plate."

"The challenge for all of us is to create a market for farmers in our area, rather than spending money to have carrots shipped from California when they are grown just outside of town," says Debra Morris, a member of Southminster-Steinhauer United Church in Edmonton who was instrumental in bringing the resolution to General Council. (See story, page 56.) "By not using gas for trucks to bring produce in, we can also help save the environment, and the food is fresher."

Morris explains that the need to support local farmers is a national issue and says she believes the United Church can "challenge people in congregations throughout Canada to look at how we use land within our urban areas." However, she also sees a general distrust or a lack of understanding between urban and rural congregations across the country.

"People in rural areas look at the city as a place that's eating up their farmland, while people in the city are concerned about where their food comes from and how much it costs," says Morris, a member of the Local and Global Justice Committee for Edmonton Presbytery. "As a national church, the United Church is in a really good position to bridge some of that gap and build community to find places where we can meet each other on these issues."

Some of that bridge building is already occurring in Edmonton. Five United Church congregations in the city (Southminster-Steinhauer, Ebenezer, Mill Woods, Riverbend, and Trinity) have been involved with the Greater Edmonton Alliance (GEA), a non-profit citizen's organization that promotes social action for the common good. Through its Shake the Hand That Feeds You initiative, GEA has been developing relationships between local farmers and congregations, and creating greater access to local food to support a sustainable local economy, reduce carbon emissions, and preserve agricultural land.

In September 2008, GEA launched its This Land Is Our Land campaign at Southminster-Steinhauer, through which about 300 people picked up baskets of locally produced foods, heard farmers' stories, and committed to working together to preserve local farmland.

One of the offshoots of that collaboration was a successful lobbying effort that targeted Edmonton's city council as it prepared its next four-year municipal development plan, which would include planning three areas of the city, two of which have prime agricultural soil.

"Before those areas get developed, a city-wide food study will have to be done," explains Debbie Hubbard, a member of Trinity United Church and co-chair of GEA's local food team, which prepared its own proposal on creating a secure and vibrant local food economy in Edmonton. Hubbard says that now Edmonton's municipal plan has a whole section devoted to food security and local food compared to the "two lines" that mentioned the issues in a previous draft.

In another successful undertaking, last September GEA and the Edmonton Potato Growers organized the Great Potato Giveaway to draw attention to the farmland being lost to urban development.

A farmer who spent more than a quarter century trying to preserve the rural nature of his farmland, which was eventually annexed to the city, offered to give away more than 45,000 kg (100,000 lbs.) of potatoes on his land. The response defied expectations.

"Over 7,000 people showed up—of all ages, shapes, and colours—and it caused a traffic jam for several hours as people waited to get to the farm," recalls Hubbard. "They came not just for the potatoes, which ran out, but because people also wanted to have their kids dig in the dirt, to reconnect to the land."

To the east, in southwestern Ontario, a similar reconnection is happening.

For example, over the past five years, young married couples in the Chatham area are opting to pursue farming as a career.

"These twentysomethings are staying in the community, which gives us an extreme amount of hope that there is a future for us," explains Eric Skillings, who was raised on a dairy farm near Woodstock, Ontario, and is a lay minister for two United Church congregations, St. Andrew's and St. Luke's, in the South Buxton Pastoral Charge.

Between both churches there are about 130 families and of those, about 30 are farming. But only two pursue it on a full-time basis; the rest have jobs in the city in order to pay the bills and keep their 700-plus-acre farms running.

Money has been so tight that in some cases, rich farmland has been leased for use as wind farms, two of which surround Skillings' land.

"Is it taking away good land? Sure it is—but if you don't have money to grow crops, what do you do?" asks Skillings. "Like any other business person, farmers have to make a profit on their investments."

To help farmers earn income from the fruits of their labour,





A farmer earns 12 cents from a loaf of bread like that held by Eric Skillings, a lay minister near Chatham, Ontario. If the price of wheat rose from \$4.75 to \$6 a bushel, the farmer's share would rise to 15 cents per loaf. Skillings says that "would make a big difference in what the farmer takes home and consumers would only pay a few pennies more."

London Conference's Rural Life Committee, which Skillings chairs, has long encouraged buying from local producers by promoting maps that identify farm gates where people can purchase produce or meat.


"But what would really help in the long run is to have food prices that are not necessarily a whole lot higher than they are, but that would pay farmers a good return," says Skillings, who also chairs the Canadian Rural Church Network.

Yet last fall, when the price of bread in the Chatham area rose by 20 cents, the market price for wheat remained unchanged.

However, as Skillings points out, when food prices do rise, consumers may be quick to blame producers. "These same producers, though, are saddled with rising costs of fuel, equipment, and other expenses required to run their farms while market prices for their products remain static."

He believes that by working closely with and understanding the needs of rural communities, the United Church can take a lead in stressing the importance of preserving land and supporting farmers that produce the food we eat. At the same time, the church can also help rural people appreciate the food security issues that are uppermost in the minds of urban Canadians.

In Alberta, Debbie Hubbard says that at the personal level, the issue of food security is about "building relationships with the land, with the people who produce our food, with each other, and with our global neighbours.

"Once I have deepened or built relationships, then I feel I have some power, the ability to act by making choices where I spend my dollar and what I spend it on." 

Christopher Guly is an Ottawa journalist, a member of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery, and a former member of the organizing committee for World Food Day in Winnipeg.

How Can You Use This Article?

Examine the Alberta petition on agricultural land and local food security, which the 40th General Council passed. It's on page 390 of the *Record of Proceedings*, which can be downloaded in whole or in part at <http://gc40.united-church.ca/en/downloads/rop>. Initiate a discussion about how you can help to bridge the gap between rural and urban Canada, promote responsible land use, and make our food system more sustainable.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Brainstorm ideas for how you can work in your home, church, and community to address land use in your area and make our food system more sustainable.
- Invite local land use specialists and ask them: What issues concern your area? How can we help to address those? Invite local producers to your church, and ask: What are your challenges? How can we support your endeavours in the local food production and distribution process?
- Reach out to other churches in your area (urban if you're rural and vice versa) and ask: How can we work together to address these issues?