

Exploring the Principles of Food Sovereignty

A Resource for the Food Justice Week of Action

Introduction: From Charity to Food Security to Food Sovereignty

Giving food to those who are hungry is a compassionate, faithful act. When it comes to food justice, we have come a long way, as a church and as a society. Our first response to hunger has always been *charity*. Our food banks demonstrate this well, as do humanitarian responses to famines overseas.

However, as the popular proverb states, “If you give a hungry person a fish, you feed them for a day, but if you teach them how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime.” With this sentiment food justice advocates progressed toward the idea of *food security*, which means having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In Canada, we see breakfast programs, community kitchens and gardens, and community food centres where food insecure people can get assistance in taking action themselves to address their food needs. Internationally, in addition to food, we send agricultural aid so small-scale farmers can improve their farming skills and techniques. We sponsor expanded livestock ownership and kitchen garden building programs.

But though we may be getting better at helping people experiencing food insecurity feed themselves, we must do more to address the systemic and underlying justice issues that create food insecurity in the first place. There are also rights, power, and privilege issues associated with hunger: “My family never has consistent access to nutritious food,” someone might say. Or, “I want to decide what and when and how much I eat” or “I want to have a say in the kind of food system¹ my family participates in.”

In 1993, the La Via Campesina movement began as a global collective response to the free-market corporate agriculture that dominates and sometimes devastates the lives and livelihoods of peasants, small farmers, landless people, women farmers, Indigenous people, migrants, and agricultural workers around the world. Current membership in La Via Campesina is 200 million people from 73 countries. These small-scale farmers grow up to 70 percent of all basic food eaten in the world. They are more often women with subsistence livelihoods. La Via Campesina promotes a concept deeply embedded with justice: *food sovereignty*.

Food sovereignty can be defined as *the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems*.

This concept of food justice, which moves beyond the charity model to a model of personal and political empowerment, is endorsed by United Church partner Food Secure Canada (<http://foodsecurecanada.org>) and is also the basis of the United Church’s “Toward Food Sovereignty for All” policy. In this Food Justice Week of Action, let us faithfully, as individuals or in small groups, explore principles of food sovereignty, so we can derive our own understandings and find ways for local and collective food justice where we live.

¹ A food system includes all those activities involving the production, processing, transport and consumption of food. It also includes the governance and economics of food production, its sustainability, the degree to which food is wasted, and how food production affects the natural environment. It includes issues of how food affects health and well-being, including nutrition, obesity, and food safety. A particularly important area of policy concern is the food system in less developed countries where hunger and malnutrition can be rife, as well as the links between food and sustainable development. (adapted from a definition offered by Future of Food, www.futureoffood.ox.ac.uk/what-food-system)

Principle: Focus on Food for People

In business, food is often considered a commodity (a product that can be bought and sold), and land can simply be an investment that appreciates in value. However, for our lives, food and farmland are essential, just like the air and water. We can't live without them. So what is food doing in someone's financial portfolio, being bought, sold, or exchanged without a sense of its real and sacred purpose?

In a 2015 report (*Losing Our Grip—2015 Update*), the National Farmers Union reported that Canadian farmers owe nearly \$80 billion in debt. Young farmers not only have to compete with huge institutional investors in the land market, but they also carry huge debts to pay for land and equipment. So family farmers struggle to produce food in a way that supports their communities and also takes care of the land for future generations. NFU President Jan Slomp has expressed the need for better farm policy and laws, predicting that without these, “the work of farming will be done by low-paid seasonal employees or farmers forced to lease land, making it difficult for them to make long-term investments to care for the land.”

This type of complex situation is not new to people of faith. The early Hebrews grappled with similar issues. The economic system of borrowing and owing, impoverishing some and creating injustice, was getting out of hand. And so the concept of jubilee was formed.

The Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-22)

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely. Should you ask, What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop? I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old.

As a principle of food sovereignty, food—along with the land, knowledge, seeds, and water needed to produce it—is understood primarily as a source of life, not as a natural resource or a mere commodity to be bought and sold for profit. The fundamental goal of a healthy food system, then, is to provide sufficient, safe, healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for

all people—regardless of their economic or social circumstances—not to generate profits or enslave farmers with impossible amounts of debt.

Questions for reflection

1. Where do you find food that is sufficiently safe, healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate?
2. What part of the idea of jubilee would you find helpful, if you would like to improve your access to safe, healthy, and nutritious food?
3. What part of your experience of food (growing it, harvesting it, buying it, cooking it, eating it) gives you the greatest sense of food's life-giving attributes?

Activity (as individuals or as a group)

1. Look through a few sale flyers from a grocery store near you. Notice the places where each product comes from.
2. Draw a large, rough map of the world (as on a paper tablecloth). Using a different colour, mark the places where these foods come from.
3. Draw lines from those places to your home. Draw vehicles (trucks? boats? planes?) that would carry those foods.
4. Think of some alternative foods that grow closer to home, and draw them on your map with a third colour.
5. Use this as your tablecloth at a special meal and discussion starter for those sitting with you at the table.

Liturgical action

Build a grace for mealtimes. Create a haiku poem as a verse in your own food justice prayer, related to the food sovereignty principle “Focus on Food for People.”

(Haiku poetry has 3 lines: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

Example: Farm, a sacred place
 Food, creation's gift to us
 We bless food for life

Musical option: *More Voices* 174, “Soil of God, You and I”

Principle: Value Food Providers

It is a principle of food sovereignty that all who work to provide food—farmers, fishers, gatherers, and hunters—as well as those who transport, distribute, and prepare food, should enjoy safe and dignified working conditions and enjoy an adequate livelihood. Socially and culturally, the place of those who provide food are valued. This implies that adequate services and education are available for all food providers, particularly those in rural areas who may have traditionally been underserved.

Because farming and fishing are ways that people have provided their own livelihoods for thousands of years, there are many biblical references related to these livelihoods.

In Leviticus 19:9–10, we are told to leave food in the corners of the field, and the fallen fruit on the ground, so that the needy and the stranger may glean what is left. In the Parable of Weeds among the Wheat (Matthew 13:24–30), Jesus compared the sowing of good seeds (and problems with weeds) to the kingdom of heaven. The Lesson of the Fig Tree (Matthew 24:32–35) uses our understanding of tree growth to predict the seasons. Many of Jesus' disciples were fishers, before they left their vocations to follow Jesus.

Today in Canada, many of us know little about farm life realities. The average Canadian farmer is 54 years of age, and likely has to work off-farm to have enough income to make ends meet. Statistics Canada figures show that between 1991 and 2011, the number of farms and farmers shrank by nearly 25 percent. Farm debt continued to rise, and many farms were taken over by corporate managers. Cropland decreased due to urban and industrial development. In the National Farmers Union's *Losing Our Grip—2015 Update*, farmers reported changes to agriculture-related policies and laws, loss of power, increase in costs, corporate control over seeds, international trade deals, and climate change as serious threats to their livelihoods.

Internationally, charities like Oxfam report that many countries have been buying up farmland outside their borders, in order to ensure enough food for their own people. Corporations and pension investment boards are also taking over farmland for profit. “Land-grabbing” often involves taking land without the consent of those who farmed it, forcing small farmers from their homes, and planting commodity crops (for example, sugarcane, palm oil, soy) to be sold elsewhere, instead of foods that the local farmers would grow to feed local people. Two-thirds of land-grabbing happens in countries where hunger is already a serious problem.

More detailed information can be found on the GRAIN website (www.grain.org/article/entries/5492-the-global-farmland-grab-in-2016-how-big-how-bad).

This hardly sounds like the idyllic pastoral life that we like to imagine. Land takeovers, loss of local food crops, environmental threats, excessive debt, and corporate interference all conjure up stress, distress, and the worsening of hunger.

Questions for reflection

1. What can we find in our faith heritage that could help inspire us to show new ways to value the food providers in Canada?
2. How could we support the valuing of food providers in other countries?
(Here are a couple of articles on the Canadian Foodgrains Bank website about the importance of supporting food producers: <http://foodgrainsbank.ca/news/increasing-food-security-and->

[nutrition](#) and <http://foodgrainsbank.ca/news/irrigation-dam-provides-opportunities-to-farmers-in-ethiopia>.

3. Is there a parable in the Bible that connects with how you feel or think about this principle of food sovereignty?

Activities

Option One: You can be a farmer, too, by growing sprouts at home. Put ¼ cup of whole lentils or beans into a glass jar and add water. Leave it in a dark place at room temperature, covered, for 24 hours. Drain, rinse with fresh water, drain, and cover loosely. Keep in a dark place and rinse 4 times a day until sprouts are formed. Use them in any recipe that calls for bean sprout.

Option Two (as an individual or in a group): Draw a picture or make a collage, showing how you could say thank you to a food producer (farmer or fisher) for their hard work in bringing food to your table. Use this as a placemat at a meal and discussion starter with those sitting with you.

Liturgical action

Build a grace for mealtimes. Create a haiku poem as a verse in your own food justice prayer, related to the food sovereignty principle “Value Food Providers.”

(Haiku poetry has 3 lines: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

Example: Farmer, fisher folk
 Toiling through the seasons
 Silent thanks to them

Musical options (to sing):

Voices United 306, “God of the Farmlands”

More Voices 113, “Jesus Saw Them Fishing”

Musical options (for listening and reflection):

“Peter’s Dream” by Lennie Gallant (<https://youtu.be/H1bqqdNZOy8>)

“Farmer’s Song” by Murray McLauchlan (<https://youtu.be/HTMvtII8EIk>)

“The Field behind the Plow” by Stan Rogers (<https://youtu.be/PUM8mXJre1c>)

Principle: Localize Food Systems

In the vision of food sovereignty, local producers grow, cultivate, raise, and gather food first and foremost for local and regional needs. The scale of production is such that farmers and other producers can earn a dignified livelihood, but not so large that a few individuals (or corporate entities) gain significant power over others or over essential resources. Indeed, local populations and producers maintain control over the land, water, and seeds needed to produce sufficient safe, healthy, and culturally appropriate food for all.

Let us contrast three experiences of food production. First, the experience of a project supported by the Canadian Foodgrains Bank in Laos, just south of China.

We flew from the capital city, Vientiane, to an airport in the north of the country, then drove south for 3 hours to the Houn District. Every motorized vehicle that passed us heading north was a truck carrying bananas, squash, beans or watermelons to Chinese markets. The local people, with whom the Canadian Foodgrains Bank church partners were working with nutrition and sanitation projects, had been convinced to grow these foodstuffs for cash, instead of growing crops for themselves. In the outlying villages, where cash crops of corn had replaced local crops of sticky rice (their staple diet), the corncribs were full and the larders were empty. The Chinese price for corn had bottomed out, so farmers could not afford to sell, and they had grown no foods that they would eat. To make matters worse, the land where the corn was grown was depleted much more than with rice crops, so it would be many years fallow (or expensive fertilizers and inputs) before the land could again produce food.
(Margaret Tusz-King, March 2016)

Second, consider the relationship between corporations and farmers. In order to increase production, new varieties of seeds are always being developed and patented by large businesses, so fewer traditional heritage varieties are available. It is illegal for Canadian farmers to save patented seeds from one crop for planting the following year. In 2004, after years in the courts, the Supreme Court of Canada allowed prosecution of a Canadian prairie farmer who had been found with plants from a patented seed growing on his land. He maintained he had no idea where they came from. This became the first of thousands of cases that the international agribusiness, Monsanto, would bring against farmers for allegedly infringing upon their patents. The Unitarian Service Committee reports (www.seedmap.org) that Monsanto maintains a budget of \$10 million per year, and a staff of 75 devoted to investigating and prosecuting farmers.

Finally, consider the biblical vision of feeding local people.

Leviticus 19:9–11

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Gleaning is a practice that is alive and well in Prince Edward Island. A volunteer group, the PEI Food Exchange, coordinates volunteers to pick potato fields by hand after crops are mechanically harvested, and the gleaned food is then shared with farmers and food banks. This is a generous practice. A valuing of food; a fair relationship with farmers.

Questions for reflection

1. Can you think of ways to connect the experiences of Laotians with our experiences of food imports to Canada (e.g., bananas)?
2. While some agricultural corporations tend to prioritize profits over people, others, like many farmer-owned co-operatives, put the interests of farmers and eaters first. In what ways might these co-operatives support farmers' efforts to grow food and receive a fair price for their work, and support rural agricultural life generally? As a resource for this question, consult "The Social Mission of Farm Cooperatives: What Should It Be and How Can It Be Realized?" (www.gdrc.org/icm/coop-socialmission.html)
3. Other than in farmers' fields, where else might the concept of gleaning (making sure nothing is wasted) be used, in your experience?

Activities

Option One: Go for a walk for 20–30 minutes. Look around. What evidence is there of food growing locally? Where can you purchase local foods nearby? If you don't see any, ponder what you could do to encourage local foods in your community. When you return, draw a map of where you went, what you found, and what could be.

Option Two: List as many as you can of foods that grow within 200 km of your community (vegetables, fruits, meats, grains, dairy). Then, draw up a series of menus made up of foods that are on your lists. See how many different combinations you can create that make the most of local foods, provide a balanced diet, and also connect with your favourite family dishes. Consider making a commitment to favouring these foods in the future.

Liturgical action

Build a grace for mealtimes. Create a haiku poem as a verse in your own food justice prayer, related to the food sovereignty principle "Localize Food Systems."

(Haiku poetry has 3 lines: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

Example: Lentils, wheat, and rice
 Seeds we so joyfully eat
 Nourishment indeed!

Musical options (to sing):

Voices United 307, "Touch the Earth Lightly"

More Voices 143, "We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky"

Musical options (for listening and reflection):

"Make and Break Harbour" by Stan Rogers (<https://youtu.be/6E2DFa18kYI>)

"The Garden Song" sung by John Denver (<https://youtu.be/D3FkaN0HQgs>)

Principle: Put Control Locally

Food sovereignty involves moving control of the food system away from large corporations and other forms of central control to local people. Theologically, this could be understood in terms of moving from the logic of empire to that of the “I can” of the reign of God. In practical terms, it also implies the need for local participatory decision-making over key policies and resources affecting food production.

When we start talking about policies and resources, we often begin to think about political advocacy. And some of us may feel uncomfortable, or even angry, when the topic of political advocacy comes up—it may not sound like faith work at all.

Here is what the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (a multi-denominational Christian humanitarian organization, of which the United Church is a member) says about advocacy, in *Add Your Voice*:

Why are Christians called to advocate? The Bible contains numerous accounts of when God acted on behalf of the poor and oppressed. For instance: “I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the afflicted, and executes justice for the needy” (Psalm 140:12). As people who follow Jesus, we too are called to “seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17). Advocating on behalf of those who are in need, and whose voices are not heard, is an important part of our Christian identity. Christians advocate every time they pray. We pray for those who are poor, weak, or lonely. Communicating with government officials is just another form of advocacy—one that complements our prayers. According to the U.S. organization Bread for the World, “writing a heartfelt letter is a prayerful, reflective, and personal way to seek God’s justice for hungry people.

In order to advocate politically about food, some people are getting together to develop Local Food Charters so that local government decision-makers can understand and honour the values of local people in decision-making. A food charter is a statement of values and principles to guide a community’s food policy. People from many different community interests and organizations typically meet and discuss their concerns and desires around food and agriculture policy, to come up with a common vision and set of principles. These form the basis of their own unique, local, community food charter. When the municipality adopts the food charter, it becomes a public document to guide decision-making.

Here are three communities that have undertaken the process to develop Local Food Charters.

- The Guelph-Wellington (Ontario) Food Charter seeks to build a vibrant, sustainable food secure partnership within the Guelph-Wellington region, and includes several actions or principles under each of the following headings: Health, Education, Sustainable Development, Environment, Culture, and Social Justice.
- The Vancouver Food Charter is guided by these five principles: Community Economic Development, Ecological Health, Social Justice, Collaboration and Participation, and Celebration.
- The Elgin St. Thomas (Ontario) Local Food Charter identifies its goals as follows: diversifying locally grown food, helping ensure accessible land for local growers, and supporting programs that train future farmers, growers, and gardeners.

Local Food Charters are as diverse as the people who create them. By integrating the needs of people, the land, and the future, they accomplish much-needed community conversations and provide clear guidance to elected decision-makers, with positive effects on local food systems.

Questions for reflection

1. When faith communities celebrate together, they often do it around food. What principles can you come up with that would best describe your faith community's valuing of food?
2. What could you bring, from your heritage of faith, to a discussion about a Local Food Charter in your community?

Activities

Option One: Compose a letter to your municipal government, calling for a Local Food Charter, developed with community involvement. Include at least three reasons why you think this is important, noting especially any concerns or issues your community is currently grappling with—land development issues? poverty and food prices? child nutrition? What would a Local Food Charter result in, that will improve quality of life in your community? Be positive, hopeful, and prophetic.

Option Two: Think of four or five Bible stories that talk about food, farming, or fishing. What principles or ideas can you draw from them that connect with the principle “Put Control Locally”? (Example: Parable of the Sower: good soil is required.) On a piece of paper draw a simple sunflower with a stem. In the flower's centre, write “Local Food.” Beneath the stem, write some “grounding” ideas you have gleaned from Bible stories. On the petals, write some ideas or values you would like to see in a Local Food Charter for your community.

Liturgical action

Build a grace for mealtimes. Create a haiku poem as a verse in your own food justice prayer, related to the food sovereignty principle “Put Control Locally”:

(Haiku poetry has 3 lines: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

Example: Tasty local spuds
 Pearls from local earth's bounty
 For a filling meal

Musical options (to sing):

More Voices 113, “Jesus Saw Them Fishing”

Voices United 303, “For Beauty of Prairies”

Musical options (for listening and reflection):

“Bud the Spud” by Stompin' Tom Connors (<https://youtu.be/HtySGSuKZe8>)

“Rise Up” by Parachute Club (https://youtu.be/9ddrsRpr1_Q)

“Blowing in the Wind” sung by Peter Paul and Mary (<https://youtu.be/EBwqV0QU0i83>)

Principle: Work with Nature

Genesis 1:29–30

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

With food sovereignty, food systems should—to the greatest degree possible—work in harmony with local ecosystems and mimic natural cycles in nature so that clean water, healthy soil, and biodiversity are fostered and protected. Food systems need to be designed in such a way as to minimize inputs of water, energy, and other external factors. The use of synthetic chemicals that can damage human or biological health—particularly agrochemicals like pesticides (insecticides and herbicides)—should be avoided.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has declared the World Food Day 2016 theme to be “Climate is changing—food and agriculture must too.” The world’s poorest people—many of whom are farmers, fishers, and pastoralists—are being hit hardest by higher temperatures and more frequent weather-related disasters. By 2050, the global population will be 9.6 billion; we will all need to build resilience into our food and agriculture systems to reduce the effects of climate change and ensure the well-being of ecosystems and rural populations.

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank’s Good Soil Campaign calls upon the Government of Canada to increase its international aid for small-scale agriculture. This will strengthen resilience and support the adoption of agro-ecological techniques, for improved adaptation to the challenges of climate change (drought, flooding, extreme temperatures). Resources to support this initiative can be found at <http://foodgrainsbank.ca/campaigns/good-soil>.

Sustainable agriculture is also a concern in Canada. Because plowing can increase the loss of topsoil (and it can take thousands of years to replace one inch of topsoil), many farmers now practise no-till agriculture. The downside is that the role of plowing (to control weeds) has been replaced by the use of more chemical herbicides. These herbicides can harm local wildlife and nearby waterways, and show evidence that they can be ineffective against weeds that develop resistance.

Glyphosate is a commonly used herbicide on grain crops, and is suspected to be a carcinogen by the World Health Organization. In May 2016, 48 members of the European parliament from 13 different countries tested their urine, and found that all tested positive for glyphosate, with the average concentration 17 times higher than the maximum allowed in drinking water. No one yet knows the long-term effects of such exposure.

Questions for reflection

1. It’s complicated. Creation exists as a tenuous balance of competing interests. One small change can have far-reaching effects. What faith-based principles could guide you as you grapple with the competing interests of industrialized agriculture and helping people become food self-sufficient?
2. What are other ways that, instead of working with nature, we humans find ourselves working against nature? (Think of our comforts and indulgences, and also our necessities of life.)

Activities

Option One: Go to the Canadian Foodgrains Bank website for information about the Good Soil Campaign (<http://foodgrainsbank.ca/campaigns/good-soil>). Write a letter to your member of Parliament, outlining your support and why you think this issue is important.

Option Two: We value being a part of community. For many of us, community includes our family, our neighbours, our school, our places to play. Sometimes we also talk about Earth Community, which adds in the animals, fish, and birds around which we live. Did you know that earth itself is a community? Here is one way to experience that (based on Soil Composition experiment at www.funsci.com).

Materials: a bowl of soil from a nearby outdoor garden; a glass jar with lid for each person; a pitcher of water; a ruler, pencil and paper

Each person takes a jar and puts in one part soil to three parts water. Don't fill the jar. Put on the lid, then shake the jar until all the lumps are broken down (this may take a few minutes). Set the jar down and let the contents settle.

Take a look at your jar after 40 seconds. What do you see? Is there a layer on the bottom? How high is that layer? Measure it with a ruler and write the measurement down.

Now spend some time singing or listening to *More Voices* 37, "Each Blade of Grass," or *Voices United* 296, "This Is God's Wondrous World."

Look at your jar again. Measure the thickness of the layer on the bottom now. Write it down. Plan to take the jar home, let it sit, and then measure it after 24 hours.

The layers that slowly settle show you the composition of your soil. The first bottom layer is the stone, sand, or gravel. After about half an hour, the silt will settle out. Then, after 24 hours, the top layer will be clay.

You may also see some floating organic material. Or, if you are lucky, you may see some tiny insects or other life emerging from your soil. Unseen by the naked eye are the micro-organisms that break down components from organic materials (compost), mobilizing important nutrients for the seeds to grow into healthy plants.

Isn't it amazing? This is God's community, often unknown and unseen by us—but crucial to our own life and toiling with little recognition.

Liturgical action

Build a grace for mealtimes. Create a haiku poem as a verse in your own food justice prayer, related to the food sovereignty principle "Work with Nature":

(Haiku poetry has 3 lines: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

Example: Tiny helpful bugs
 Nourishing our soil and seeds
 Let me not forget

Musical options:

More Voices 174, "Soil of God"

Voices United 300, "God Whose Farm Is All Creation"

Principle: Recognize That Food Is Sacred

This principle of food sovereignty is built upon Indigenous insights, with the understanding that food is not only sacred—it is also a part of a web of relationships with the natural world, that sustains and is an essential part of human culture and human community. As such, while it is a physical necessity, it is more than a physical necessity—it is an embodiment of culture, traditional wisdom, and celebration.

Every culture and religion experiences food, in some way, as a part of sacred beliefs, traditions or rituals. The Hebrew tradition includes the Seder feast that marks the beginning of Passover. Hindus associate different foods with gods and goddesses, and particularly value milk and butter because they are from the cow, representing the divine mother. Christians celebrate the Eucharist, a sacrament of bread and wine in memory of Jesus' last supper. All of these practices take the food into a human experience, giving lives meaning, expanding religious understandings and enabling the continuation of culture and traditions.

The First Nations of this land have deeper sacred traditions and understandings of food, such that food is considered sacred where it is grown, how it is harvested and how it is distributed among humans and our non-human neighbours. Food is a part of, and also a vehicle for, relationships among the whole natural world in which we belong.

As Food Secure Canada's *Indigenous Food Sovereignty Discussion Paper 1* explains, it was First Nations who developed, with no acknowledgement or compensation, many of the world's foods: "beans, corn, squash, potatoes, berries, herbs and medicines.... Land and food are at the centre of what it is to be indigenous." Nomadic cultures travelled vast territories to access traditional foods, building values of giving, sharing, and trading. "Indigenous peoples hold lands, foods, medicines, and animals as sacred and freely gifted. Without them, humanity would cease to be..."

This sense of deep connection with the land, without a concept of private ownership, of freedom to exploit for human aggrandizement or licence to degrade and ruin, is very different from our mainstream Canadian culture. Compare it to the biblical creation story, and the place that humans are accorded there.

Genesis 1:26

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

The recognition of food as sacred, if we are able to realize it, will challenge widely accepted and deeply embedded concepts of ownership rights, access to land, the ethics of economic development, sharing of wealth—indeed, much of what underpins the global economy. The disparity between the few extremely wealthy and the many extremely poor people will be shattered, and perhaps a more just and sustainable world will emerge.

Questions for reflection

1. How does your understanding of the Genesis creation story invite you to experience sacredness in the natural world?

2. In Canada, how might our treatment of the natural world have been different if our European colonial ancestors had understood and been guided by Aboriginal understandings of the sacred?
3. Is there something that you could give up or change, to make your relationship with food more sacred?

Activity: The Gift of Making a Meal with Others

God has provided creation—a sacred place—where all God’s creatures (including us!) can find what we need to live. This recipe has a variety of sacred ingredients. As you prepare each one, consider its value as an element of life. And if you are blessed with companions in the kitchen, share your thoughts and memories about food as you cook and eat together. Food figures highly in our family and societal traditions. Soup can be an inexpensive and nutritious meal. Be attentive to each other, your task and the precious food you share. Show your gratitude together.

Lentil Soup (serves 6)

Ingredients: 1 tsp dried oregano, 1 bay leaf, 1 tsp dried basil, ½ tsp salt, ½ tsp pepper, 2 tbsp oil, 1 chopped onion, 4 cups diced vegetables (carrots, celery, green beans, spinach, kale), 2 cloves minced garlic, 1 can crushed tomatoes, 2 cups red lentils, 8 cups water.

In a large pot add the oil, onions, and garlic. Cook stirring for a few minutes until softened. Add all other ingredients except the tomatoes. Bring to a boil, then turn down to a simmer. Cook for 20 minutes. Stir in tomatoes and cook 10 minutes more. Taste and correct for salt. Serve.

Liturgical action

Build a grace for mealtimes. Create a haiku poem as a verse in your own food justice prayer, related to the food sovereignty principle “Recognize That Food Is Sacred.”

(Haiku poetry has 3 lines: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

Example: Edible presents
 Seeds and fruits of life itself
 Miracle of food

Musical options:

Voices United 282, “Long before the Night”

More Voices 37, “Each Blade of Grass”

More Voices 193, “God Bless to Us Our Bread” (a blessing for a meal)