

## Food & Faith Talk at San Jose Presbytery Meeting

By Andrew Kang Bartlett, Associate for National Hunger Concerns,  
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Thank you for this opportunity to be with you today. You probably know about the Presbyterian Hunger Program, but let me just mention the five areas of focus: direct hunger relief, development assistance, hunger education, lifestyle integrity – such as the Enough for Everyone program – and public policy advocacy. On the airplane, I came up with a somewhat irreverent explanation of the PHP based on the saying about teaching someone to fish rather than simply handing them a fish:

**Direct hunger relief:** Cook up and hand out fish sticks

**Development assistance:** Teach people to fish and help them get a jobs at Long John Silver's

**Educate about hunger:** Teach why Presbyterians shouldn't eat all the fish in the seas

**Lifestyle integrity:** Change our habit of eating all the fish ourselves

**Public policy advocacy:** Advocate with the blowfish (& piranhas) in Washington and in state governments to pass laws that increase incomes, so people can buy enough fish to feed their families

- and -

Fight for policies that make it possible for family fishing businesses to survive and against international trade policies that favor giant commercial fish companies

You would think that I – coming all this distance – would have an upbeat, hopeful message. That was my intention. But, last week, I met in San Francisco with PC(USA)'s Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy's Energy Resolution Team, a Task Force working to update the Church's General Assembly policy on energy. We looked at some of the best thinking on current U.S. and global trends, and the picture is frightening. If you'll bear with me for a bit as I summarize some of those trends, there is--at the end of the tunnel--hope. Perhaps the darkness will make it easier to see the Light.

Let us, for a few moments, sit back and expand our vision – looking beyond the details of this meeting and our everyday concerns —and take a broad look at the state of the world.

Take our communities and the communities around us. Whether you can see it or not, since poverty has a way of hiding itself in America, poverty is on the rise. The Census Bureau just reported that the number of Americans living in poverty increased by 1.3 million people last year. This is the third straight annual increase. Approximately 35.8 million people lived below the poverty line in 2003, or about 12.5 percent of the population. The rise was more dramatic for children. There were 12.9 million living in poverty last year, or 17.6 percent of the under-18 population. That is one out of every

six children living in poverty--**this** in the richest country in the world. We're going in the wrong direction.

Other trends we noted at in the Energy Resolution Team meeting... The human population has doubled since 1950, and our consumption of energy, mineral resources, fresh water, soil and the biosphere has so altered the planet, that we are witnessing **and contributing to** the sixth mass extinction on Earth. This is the only mass extinction caused by **human** activity (the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs was the fifth) The rate that species are disappearing is between 1,000 and 10,000 times the natural levels. And, it will get worse, primarily due to our destruction of ecosystems and increasing use of fossil fuels. Climate researchers and scientists are predicting that in the best case scenario, the planet's temperature will rise 4 degrees; in the worst case, it will rise about 9 or 10 degrees, in fewer than 100 years. The last time temperatures rose that much was in the Permian period (251 million years ago), when 95% of the world's species were wiped out. During this and the next several decades, human population growth, mass extinction and climate change will test the resilience of planetary life.

Like many of you, I have children--two young boys, and it breaks my heart to think about the damaged world I am passing along to them and their children.

Let me read something I came across this week that puts this perspective into sharper focus; it is:

### **A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS**

We, the People of the future, like the twenty thousand generations who came before us, have the right to breathe air that smells sweet, to drink water that runs pure and free, to swim in waters that teem with life, and to grow our food in rich, living earth.

We have the right to inherit a world unsullied by toxic chemicals, nuclear waste, or genetic pollution. We have the right to walk in untamed nature and to feel the awe that comes when we suddenly lock eyes with a wild beast.

We beseech you, the people of today: do not leave your dirty messes for us to clean up; do not take technological risks, however small, that may backfire catastrophically in times to come. Just as we respectfully ask that you not burden us with your deferred debts and depleted pension plans, we also claim our right to a share of the planet's ecological wealth. Please don't use it all up.

We, in turn, promise to do the same. We grant these same rights and privileges to the generations who will live after us; we do so in the sacred hope that the human spirit will live forever.

A curse on any generation who ignores this plea.

Since today we are celebrating God's creation, God's bounty -- in a church with its own gorgeous community garden -- let's take a look at the planet's soil. Wind and water erosion, deforestation, overexploitation and other causes have degraded between 10-20% of our cropland and 70% of our rangeland. Our approach to resource extraction and agriculture is threatening future productive capacity. This is the reason PHP and HAEs ask Presbyterians and congregations to work together with other Presbyterians, faith groups and non-profit organizations to advocate for a Farm Bill that insures the right to adequate nutrition of all people, protects farmers and moves us toward approaches to agriculture that are sustainable. This can have far-reaching and positive impacts.

Another emphasis of the PHP is building local food economies -- working toward sustainability through the development of local and regional food systems. You at Foothills Presbyterian Church, in this presbytery and in California are at the cutting edge of this growing movement for community food security. Building food economies is critical because it stimulates the local economy, allows family farmers to survive, preserves farmland, reduces pollution and avoids other destructive aspects of our industrialized food system<sup>1</sup>. The primary cause is excess nitrogen from agricultural run-off. One of the biggest problems is the great distance food travels from farm to plate.

Food eaten in the U.S. travels an average of 1,500 miles. More than 43 billion gallons of diesel fuel are used to transport food each year in the United States. Ten calories of fossil-fuel energy are used to produce, process, transport and prepare each single calorie of food consumed. This is not sustainable into the future.

How do we build local food economies? We vote with our dollars every time we choose a product and by where we shop. You and I can do more of our food shopping at independent grocery stores, local food coops, farmers' markets, get your produce through Community Supported Agriculture (or Congregation Supported Agriculture), where you pay up front at the beginning of the growing season and get a box of fresh produce each week. So buy locally produced food.

Does anyone eat meat? You're probably afraid to raise your hand, right? More than 50% of all grain in the U.S. and 40% worldwide goes to feed livestock. To translate this into hunger terms -- They estimate that 12 million tons of grain are needed to adequately feed every person that dies from hunger and hunger-related causes. Say, we in the U.S. devoted some of the grain that we normally feed to cattle. How much less beef would you guess we would have to eat? A mere 10%. 10% lower beef consumption by

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<sup>1</sup> Dead zones in our oceans and seas are increasing. These are areas totally devoid of all life; the biggest is the size of Ireland (about 27,000 square miles).

Americans, if you redistributed that grain, would rid the world of death from hunger. So **here** is something simple we can do – eat one less meal with beef each week. Replace beef with chicken or with protein derived from vegetable sources.

From a spiritual perspective, it is essential that we remember **what food is**. Genesis 1 :29-30 offers a clear answer. (*The next two paragraphs are from "Just Eating?" by Kirsten Peachy*)

[29] And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

[30] 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.

In Genesis 1 and elsewhere throughout the Bible, food is described as a gift from God. It is God who provides plants for the first people to eat; God who rains manna and quail on the grumpy Israelites complaining in the desert; God who later brings them into a land flowing with milk and honey and God who feeds Elijah with the help of ravens, widows and angels. Jesus teaches his followers to ask God daily for bread. He also tells them not to worry about food because God feeds even the sparrows. In the biblical tradition, food is an expression of God's tenderness and affection. It is sacred because it is a gift from a God who loves us.

Today it is harder to see God's fingerprints on the food we eat. Ninety percent of the American diet is processed food. It comes to us packaged, stamped and dated, with a wrapper declaring who made it: Safeway or Libby or Dole or the elves at the Keebler treehouse. This shift from **food as gift** to **food as commodity** has no doubt affected our souls as well as our waistlines. A **commodity** is best bought on sale; a **gift** is something we receive with deep gratitude. A **commodity** can be wasted, gobbled up, easily replaced; a **gift** cannot.

Again, let's think about our children and grandchildren. Physiologically and spiritually, we really are what we eat; and our children are what we feed them. Much of what we feed them is refined, processed, denatured foods tainted with synthetic pesticides. And we feed them in other ways too – we feed them TV, movies, and commercials full of the newest games, gadgets, and fad products; we bombard them with logos and create desires in them that they have no control over. A huge proportion of the \$2 trillion in consumer debt held by Americans is owed by kids under 18. Marketing targets kids because they have fewer filters. We must help feed them wholesome food, shield them from the onslaught of advertising, and arm them with critical thinking skills.

*(This and the two action steps below are from "Just Eating?")*

But back to food -- Nutritionists would say that fresh food is preferable to processed food because it is richer in nutrients and less likely to be loaded with salt, sugar and saturated fats. But it goes deeper than that: a meal fresh from the ground reminds us of the sacredness of food and of the One who provides it; the One who said, "This is my body broken for you. Take and eat." When we eat whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables, we honor our bodies' needs for fiber and nutrients. We also honor God who brings these things forth from the earth.

Here are couple **Food and Faith Action Steps** you may wish to try:

1. Go grocery shopping this week and buy five foods that remind you that food is a gift from God. Eat them with relish and respect. Where is the best place to buy unprocessed foods? Is there a farmer's market that you can walk to? Research your options.

A second thing...

2. Fossil fuels and cheap labor offer us (in North America) access to an abundance of cheaply priced food. It is cheap because some costs are passed on to the future generations who will need to clean up the environment; others costs are borne by farm workers or animals in factory farms. This week when you go grocery shopping, select organic and locally grown foods that more accurately reflect what it costs to grow food in healthy ways. Splurge on hormone-free milk, pasture-fed eggs or those organic salad greens you don 't normally buy because they are too expensive. Serve a meal highlighting these so-called "luxuries." See if paying more broke your budget or whether it increased your respect for the food you eat and maybe limited your consumption?

Other ways to **support a more just and healthy food system** –

- Presbyterian Coffee Project – drink FT coffee, tea, and cocoa like many of your churches are doing, and drink it at home. There are now nearly 2000 congregations that have switched over to Fair Trade.
- Support the One Great Hour of Sharing so the Hunger Program can continue to support wind generation development, sustainable agriculture, community food policy work, urban gardening, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and food systems education.
- Serve local foods at your next church potluck, event and at the next presbytery meeting.

**Help create the policy environment** in which local food systems can grow:

- Form local food councils as a number of cities are doing around the U.S. and Canada, to support sustainable agriculture and local food.

- Support “anti-sprawl” policies that encourage more densely-populated urban centers while maintaining surrounding countryside for farming and conservation.
- Encourage institutional purchasing policies that give preference to locally-produced items, such as the farm-to-cafeteria programs that are successfully sprouting up in schools around the U.S.
- PC(USA)’s trade justice work [Just Trade [www.pcusa.org/trade](http://www.pcusa.org/trade)] educates the Church about the injustices of “free trade” as it is now practiced—practices which make national and local food security difficult or impossible. Help promote justice in the formulation of trade agreements and alternative trade initiatives.
- Finally, take advantage of PHP’s Food & Faith initiative. [[www.pcusa.org/hunger/food](http://www.pcusa.org/hunger/food)] On the website, you can find resources and information to learn about the realities of the industrial food system and more ideas about how to support local food systems. You can read about congregations around the country working out of their faith convictions to build local food systems. Soon there will be a curriculum on Just Eating that you can use in your Adult and high school study groups.

This is a growing movement, and you in California have a head start and can play a leadership role in spreading the values and systems that treat food as a sacred gift from God.