

# UPDATE

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*The Food Justice Network is a community of supporters, staff and members of Canadian Foodgrains Bank engaging in issues of hunger and injustice. We invite you to join us.*



**END HUNGER**

IS NOT THIS THE KIND OF FASTING I HAVE CHOSEN: TO LOOSE THE CHAINS OF INJUSTICE AND UNTIE THE CORDS OF THE YOKE, TO SET THE OPPRESSED FREE AND BREAK EVERY YOKE? IS IT NOT TO SHARE YOUR FOOD WITH THE HUNGRY ... AND NOT TURN AWAY FROM YOUR OWN FLESH AND BLOOD.

*Isaiah 58: 6-7*

## ARE WE RUNNING OUT OF FOOD ?

For most of us who buy our groceries in supermarkets stuffed with attractive food, this question seems silly. Yes, the prices may have risen a bit but food is still, for most of us, very affordable. But for an organization committed to ending hunger, the health of the global food supply is vital.



Global food production has continued to increase steadily. The global production of cereal grains increased again in 2007 reaching just over 2 billion tonnes to feed about 6.5 billion people. Even with increasing human population, the per person amounts of food have also been slowly increasing.

Food prices have risen dramatically, and history has shown that when agricultural prices increase, so does production. Now the current high prices, that for wheat has more than doubled in the past two years, are expected to cause global grain production to increase again. The last time there was a rapid increase in grain prices in the mid-1970s, the substantial increase in production in the next years dampened the fears of food shortages.

There are good reasons to think that this time it could be different. The first issue is the rapidly changing human diet in countries like China and India. In the mid 1980s the average Chinese person ate about 20 kg of meat per year – about 400 gms or 13 oz per week. By 2005 this had risen to 1 kg or over 2 pounds per week. But what does this have to do with grain?

China and India between them account for one third of all humans. Most of this meat is produced by feeding animals grain. And it takes between two and eight kg of grain to produce a single kg of meat. So increasing meat consumption drives even more rapidly increasing demand for our basic grains. If the Indians and Chinese follow our example they will continue to increase their meat consumption – we still eat twice as much meat as they do. This diet



changes will assure that the demand for cereals by those with money will continue to rise.



Liquid bio-fuels, or agrofuels as they are also called, are also making heavy demands on the global supply of cereals and oilseeds (see October 2007 Food Justice Update). Cereal use to make ethanol alone is expected to grow to use 8% of total supplies by 2016. This may not seem like much unless you realize that this is roughly equal to all internationally traded cereals. Furthermore these predictions by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) take into account the development of so-called ‘second generation’ bio-fuels. Even though cereals used in bio-fuels may also leave residues for some other feed uses, the demand for cereals for biofuels is new and very significant.

Finally, the assumption that we can continue to increase agricultural production is challenged by questions of climate change and water availability. Climate change over the next decade is expected to increase food production in North America but in most other areas, especially in Africa, its impact will be to reduce production. In irrigated agricultural areas which produce about 20% of our food water is also becoming more scarce.

So, although we are not running out of food yet, there is a very strong case for us to take great care of the ‘gifts of the earth’. At the Foodgrains Bank we are placing increasing importance on finding the best ways to support small farmers’ efforts in developing countries to increase their own production and reduce the risks from climate change. But we must all think carefully about our personal decisions— the food and fuel decisions we make every day.

## WHY PUBLIC WITNESS?

Any public act that takes our faith outside the church walls and onto the streets, and works towards influencing public policy or societal values is considered an act of public witness. What does it mean for us to engage our wider community with a Christian perspective on the issues?

Every once in a while, perhaps more likely in the verbal storm of an election event, Christians grapple with the tension of political involvement. In fact, mixing politics with religion may well be the most common taboo topic even within a family. Asking about who you voted for is like asking to see their bank statements. And the oft-quoted phrase in Christian circles rings in the memory: “We shouldn’t get too political....”

Truly, there is a reason for the fear of “getting political” from a Christian point-of-view. For many people, there is a tendency to use political influence in order to represent God in the political commons. This is usually accomplished by euphemistically speaking on behalf of “Christian values” or “people of faith”, as though it were actually possible.



- *Jesus clears the temple: crossing social and political boundaries*

No better time than Lent to revisit the places to which Jesus leads – not only into the desert, but then also to the places where most of the powerful people of his day would never have been found: visits to lepers, conversations with beggars and women at work, or touching the people thought to be crazy in his day with love and healing. And people followed him, probably because, with him, those individuals

found a voice where they would otherwise have fallen silent to history. Without them we would have been robbed of Mary's Magnificat or the thief's "Jesus, remember me...."

Lent calls us to re-examine our relationships. If we find ourselves more concerned about our own interests rather than those of the poor, the hungry, or the dispossessed, then here is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the people of the past who were not deterred by their inevitable involvement in the political sphere.

We don't limit this involvement to confrontational public statements from the likes of Martin Luther ruffling feathers in Wittenburg or Archbishop Oscar Romero defying a repressive government, but also to those, like Mother Teresa for example, who simply do what they do on behalf of the poor. And in reality most others who work on behalf of the voiceless and downtrodden do so with little or no visible recognition of their own effort.

This beautiful world we share is yet marked by significant societal problems. In our desire to grow into mature Christians, we recognize that the substance of our faith is lived out in asking good questions, calling out the fallacies that contribute to ongoing oppression or unjust situations, and remaining critically aware. This implies some kind of public presence, and we do not shrink away from this world, though we recognize ourselves as travelers here.

Reflect with prayer and fasting on the character of your own public witness. If Lent is about *right relationships*, then let our public life be one in which we speak on behalf of those whose voice is not heard by the powers that be; one which connects us to those to whom Jesus directed his own public ministry. In the end it brought him into sharp disrepute by those powers. I wonder if someone reminded him not to get too political.

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## ONTARIO SUPPORTERS PUSH AGRICULTURE WITH THE CIDA MINISTER

Sit down with a Cabinet Minister? Make a strong case for more aid for small farmers in developing countries? Will we even be heard? These were some of the questions raised by seven committed Foodgrains Bank supporters who met with CIDA Minister Bev Oda just before Christmas.



• *The Honourable Bev Oda in Ottawa*

The meeting, originally scheduled to be under an hour, went on for 75 minutes with the active engagement of Ms. Oda. The group told her of their various growing project activities but kept returning to the importance of CIDA making small farmer agricultural development a priority if we are going to end hunger and meet the UN Millennium Development Goals

Foodgrains Bank staff members have been working for several years to convince the federal government that it is essential for Canada to do more to help small farmers in developing countries. For a brief period around 2003, CIDA did adopt an agriculture strategy and promised to increase spending on agricultural development over 600% over the following five years. After an initial doubling of spending from a very low starting level, agriculture has been dropped as a focus from our aid program.

The Minister asked several times for good news stories about agricultural development and was unaware of the Foodgrains Bank's work in this area. Staff will be sending her a follow-up letter to illustrate some Agriculture success stories supported by the Foodgrains Bank.