

Presbytery of Hudson River

12 April 2016, Stony Point Center

The Advocacy, Education, and Networks Team recommends that the Presbytery of Hudson River concur with the Presbytery of Monmouth to overture the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to:

1. Direct the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness to advocate wherever possible in favor of alternatives to CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) or IFAPS (Industrial Food Animal Production Sites), commonly known as factory farms, and to advocate against measures that support industrialized animal farming.
2. Direct the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness to advocate in support of farm and processing plant workers, “fence line” communities surrounding factory farms, racial ethnic farmers, and family farmers and ranchers.
3. Reaffirm the 1990 proclamation “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” which asserts that humanity and nature are so inextricably bound that the suffering of one affects the other. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a history of affirming that protection of the environment is an essential part of the Christian faith.
4. Encourage all levels of the denomination (presbyteries, congregations, and individual members) to purchase only meat that carries the minimal certification of “Certified Humane Raised & Handled.”

Rationale

A. THE CONFESSION OF 1967: RECONCILIATION IN SOCIETY

“In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations (Confession of 1967, 9.43).”

These current particular challenges:

- a safe and sustainable food supply in the United States,
- environmental degradation from our current ways of industrialized farming,
- risks to humans from what is fed to food animals, and
- global hunger from an imbalance in what we in the United States take from the earth and what we give back point us toward changes that are necessary in our food production. One of those necessary changes is to end factory farming of animals and the farming monoculture of corn and soy, which is done in large part to support factory farming of food animals.

B. We can talk about the web of creation that binds us to all living things and to the earth through lifting up common biblical themes from our Judeo-Christian tradition. And in so doing, we can speak of sin, as Barbara Brown Taylor has, as “wrecked relationships” within that web. During the past half-century, as industrialized farming of food animals has developed, we have broken relationships with the earth, with other living things, with other human beings, and with food itself as a gift from God. (Taylor, *Speaking of Sin*, cited in “Just Eating?”, p. 43)

Ps 145:15-16: The eyes of all look to you,

and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand,

satisfying the desire of every living thing.

Genesis 9:16-17: “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the

sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Matthew 22:37-40: [Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Romans 8:21-22: ...that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...

“What role can the church play in shaping the future? We are called to participate in and influence this agricultural revolution by breathing fresh life into the values of sustainability, stewardship, compassion, and community.” The issues are so complex, however, that the directive of this overture is very broad. But as Keeve Nachman, PhD, of Johns Hopkins University has observed, we can identify certain populations that pay the price for the inexpensive animal protein in our food markets. Those vulnerable populations bear the brunt of many risks that are hard to measure because large corporations generally own impenetrable vertically integrated “farms”. Vertical integration means that one entity owns the animals, controls the inputs (food, chemicals, antibiotics, hormones), and owns the processing plants. Therefore that entity controls access to the market as well. These CAFO/IFAPS combinations are becoming legally impenetrable due to what are known as “Ag-Gag” laws. These laws make it a crime for undercover investigators or whistle-blowers to expose illegal activity on the grounds of one of these corporate properties. (In other words, it becomes illegal to expose illegal activity, and in some cases, not just a misdemeanor.)

So, once we have identified the vulnerable populations, it will then be important to consider what areas of concern might offer potential for impacting the people, the land, and the humane treatment of the food animals. (“We Are What We Eat,” PCUSA Report, 2002, pp. 13, 17; Nachman lectures, Johns Hopkins “Introduction to U.S. Food Systems”)

First, are the workers in U.S. IFAPS. It may come as a shock to us that they are not under the oversight of OSHA. (Nachman; PCUSA, 15) There is, in this industry, a high rate of injury among workers. But the lack of OSHA regulations is particularly disturbing because their work involves many chemicals in both the feed for and waste from the animals, in the air of both CAFOs and slaughterhouses, and in fertilizers that crop workers are in contact with. Perhaps the most concerning and best documented chemical is inorganic arsenic. Often there is no personal protective equipment available nor any decontamination facility for use after a shift. In addition to this lack of oversight, many workers are immigrants, both documented and undocumented, which adds another layer of vulnerability --- language, insurance, legality, education, and economics.

The Church has an additional concern over that of the secular world. Government agencies should indeed be concerned with physical safety, economic and racial ethnic concerns, and so forth. But for those who work in the violent and desensitizing atmosphere of the slaughterhouse or in the mind-numbing and soul-stealing CAFO environment where the expectation is solely to produce animals as commodities in as low-cost manner as possible, the Church needs to minister to the emotional and spiritual wounding of the workers. We have nurtured them to be compassionate; and as a society, we have surrounded them with media images of heroes and rescuers. And then we have abandoned them.

Isaiah 1:15: When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

"People must have renounced, it seems to me, all natural intelligence to dare to advance that animals are but animated machines.... It appears to me, besides, that [such people] can never have observed with attention the character of animals, not to have distinguished among them the different voices of need, of suffering, of joy, of pain, of love, of anger, and of all their affections. It would be very strange that they should express so well what they could not feel." ~Voltaire

The second population is the “Fence Line” and surrounding communities, mostly concentrated in the Southeast United States, mostly rural, and generally in depressed economic areas. Negative consequences of living in proximity to an IFAPS or CAFO fall into three general areas:

1. Respiratory and mental health issues. (asthma, allergies, depression, etc.)

2. Odors (compromised quality of life)
3. Economic effects (property damage and diminished property values) (Nachman)

We who are committed to those living in poverty, to those without access to power and privilege, to those living in oppressive circumstances, need to take note of this population whose lives are disrupted, and whose land and water are polluted by vast quantities of animal waste, containing chemicals, antibiotics, viruses, bacteria, heavy metals, and hormonal substances.

The water sources for about 43% of the U.S. have had pathogen contamination associated with manure. Twenty-nine states have identified other pollution problems from CAFOs. Groundwater constitutes 40% of public water supplies, but a full 97% of rural water supplies! (<http://www.pewenvironment.org/news-room/data-visualizations/infographic-cleaning-up-cafo-permit-rules-85899431053>, and Nachman) Although focusing only on poultry, the Pew Charitable Trust describes it best, in a summary of their 2011 report, “Big Chicken: Pollution and Industrial Poultry Production in America.” The report compiles and analyzes 50 years of federal and state government data to describe a business that has been remade by industrialization:

“The broiler industry has changed drastically over the last 50 years and now produces more than 8 billion birds—an increase of more than 1400%—despite the loss of 98% of broiler operations. The typical broiler chicken comes from a facility that produces more than 605,000 birds a year. The majority of these massive operations—millions of chickens and the billions of pounds of waste they produce—are concentrated in a handful of states that comprise the American Broiler Belt.” (<http://www.pewenvironment.org/news-room/video-library/the-rise-of-industrial-scale-chicken-production-85899362476>)

“The shift from the traditional diversified family farm to a more industrialized system of raising animals has contributed to the transformation of food production and rural communities in the United States. Family farms have been replaced by an industry that dictates how the animals will be raised but leaves farmers liable for waste disposal and the financial burdens associated with housing thousands of hogs or tens of thousands of chickens. Marketing power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of large, vertically integrated companies that own, process and sell the animal products and bear none of the responsibility for environmental degradation.

“Across the country, water and air pollution from industrial livestock operations have compromised the health of communities and the surrounding environment. Huge volumes of manure are commonly stored in open lagoons and applied to nearby land without treatment to control excess nutrients, pathogens and other contaminants.

“The largest industrial operations also use the most restrictive confinement methods, such as battery cages for laying hens and gestation crates for sows. These confinement types are not only among the least humane of farming practices but also contribute to the need for nontherapeutic application of antibiotics and the looming health crisis of antibiotic resistance.”

(<http://www.pewenvironment.org/campaigns/reforming-industrial-animal-agriculture/id/8589940398>)

The third population is African American and other racial ethnic farmers. These “farmers and ranchers have suffered economic losses for a longer time than their white counterparts. . . . and if present land loss continues, there will be virtually no African American farmers by the end of the first decade of this century.” Native American farmers have a similar situation, which may be more devastating, since farming is one of the primary occupations both on and off reservation lands. Asian Americans have a mixed story: Japanese Americans lost their farm ownership during World War II detentions, but Southeast Asian immigrants have found a niche in meat processing plants. Most interesting, however, is the Hispanic population, which has the largest number of new farmers. And yet, “the concerns of the lack of younger, beginning farmers may be shared by all groups.” (“We Are What We Eat,” 11) Small farms, it seems, are doomed unless something changes and changes soon.

C. Control of farm decisions are no longer predominantly in the hands of traditional farmers. Decisions are made in board rooms, far from the smell of manure, the feel of soil, the warmth of a cow’s breath. What kinds of issues might the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness seek to influence in order to benefit these three vulnerable populations? This list is not in any particular order, and it is wide-ranging – but it is certainly not exhaustive:

Worker Protection Advocacy

EPA policies

Immigration Reform

OSHA

Farm Policy

So-called “AG-GAG” legislation (making reports of criminal activity within IFAPS a criminal act)

International Trade Agreements

Clean Water and Clean Air Acts

There are Presbyterians everywhere – in board rooms, in sessions, in presbyteries, and in voting booths in communities across this nation. It is our responsibility to listen to what comes from our eyes and ears in Washington, and to stand by our brothers and sisters who are part of these vulnerable populations --- because we, too, are a vulnerable population. We are consumers of the products of the industrialized farms.

D. RESOURCES / SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Inhabiting Eden: Christians, The Bible, and The Ecological Crisis, Patricia K. Tull, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013)

“Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options”, Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>

“Factory Farming in America”, series of 6 very accessible articles by Traci Hobson sponsored by the Ian Somerhalder Foundation (begin here: <http://www.isfoundation.com/campaign/factory-farming-america-introduction>)

Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology, Jennifer R. Ayers (Baylor University Press, 2013)

“Just Eating? Practicing Our Faith at the Table”

Presbyterian Distribution Service

Advocate Health Care, Church World Service, and the Presbyterian Hunger Program/PCUSA

“We Are What We Eat” – Report approved by the 214th General Assembly

Published by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy and the Rural Ministry Office, PCUSA

“The Hands That Feed Us,” a report from the Food Chain Workers Alliance, funded in part by the PCUSA Hunger Program. It documents the situation of workers, mostly in their own words, in factory farms and along the food chain.

The Pew Charitable Trust -

<http://www.pewenvironment.org/campaigns/reforming-industrial-animal-agriculture>

“Introduction to U.S. Food Systems” – An annual 4-hour course, <https://www.coursera.org/course/foodsys> through the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future: <http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/education/onlinecourseware/>

“Green House Gas Emissions from Animal Agriculture,”

<http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/hsus-fact-sheet-greenhouse-gas-emissions-from-animal-agriculture.pdf>

“Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice”,

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment/information-and-advocacy-links/>

Humanely Raised Farm Animal Certification,

<https://www.asPCA.org/fight-cruelty/farm-animal-cruelty/welfare-conscious-choices>