

First Faith in Food workshop is both inspiring and challenging

Could faith groups join together to create a trading network to source sustainably produced food? That was one of the ideas under discussion at the first Faith in Food workshop, organised by ARC and co-hosted in New York with the Jewish environmental group Hazon.

The 24 representatives of faith and environmental groups who attended the two-day workshop agreed it had been enormously stimulating and challenging. Three key themes emerged:

- Faiths share many common values around the sacredness of food and its role in highlighting our interdependence on the rest of creation;
- Faiths are a great deal more active in terms of providing food than has been appreciated to date; and
- Faiths have a great deal more bargaining power when it comes to purchasing food than they realise.



Ian Marvy shows the group around Red Hook Community Farm run by Added Value in South Brooklyn, New York

UN Assistant Secretary General Olav Kjørvan (left), addresses the Faith in Food workshop



Nowhere was that more clearly emphasised than when Rev Al Bailey of the New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, revealed his church organises 9,000 events a year at which food is served. This huge number of events is not typical of all faith groups – it certainly stunned the workshop participants – but many faiths provide food on a regular basis to their communities. Sikh gurdwaras, for example, feed 30 million people a day in India.

When you realise this, it's clear that faith groups are in a much stronger position to demand 'food with a better story' from their suppliers than they had appreciated.

That said, sometimes those suppliers simply aren't able or willing to provide this. Also, it's not always easy to source healthy, locally produced, sustainable food if you are a small faith community – hence the idea of a trading network of faith groups which all have an interest in sourcing good, healthy food that honours their values.

This is certainly an idea we'll be investigating in more detail, so watch this space.

Faith in Food

The New York workshop was the first in a series of four workshops planned as part of ARC's new Faith in Food initiative which aims to bring about a radical change in attitudes among faith communities towards food and the land it comes from.

It is, at a personal level, about people of faith honouring their values in the food they eat. At an institutional level, it is about faiths developing policies to ensure the food they buy, grow or provide – for worship and celebration, and at festivals or in their restaurants and schools –

does not harm the environment or exploit farm labourers or cause unnecessary suffering to animals.

It seems a simple idea, and in many ways it is. It asks people of faith to be faith-consistent in how and what they eat, and it asks the institutions of faith to do the same and to lead by example.

Because food accounts for around 30% of an individual's carbon footprint, eating more sustainable food would have an enormous impact upon climate change as well as the environment, human health and animal welfare.

But, as Nigel Savage, executive director of Hazon told the workshop, food is a complex issue: "It's not just about ethics, it's also memory, family, tradition and desire."

There were plenty of examples of wonderful food-related activities by faiths at the workshop, from faith-run organic farms to community supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, and social justice campaigns.

Helping the land help people know God

Brent Was, who was representing the Episcopal Church, told us about his work at Emery House, a Society of St. John the Evangelist retreat centre in West Newbury, Massachusetts. With the Brothers he has initiated a ministry of 'Helping the land help people know God', through the founding of a small sustainable farm feeding the SSJE community, 15 local families and partnerships with local churches to provide high quality, local produce.

Hazon's CSA scheme has grown enormously since it started in 2004; now it has linked up 45 Jewish communities with local farmers across America, and Hazon's CSA programme is the biggest (and was the first) effort in the American Jewish community to support local, sustainable agriculture.

Sister Mary Ann Garisto is director of the Sisters of Charity of New York's organic farm just outside New York City. As well as providing food for 200 CSA shareholders, it donates a portion of its fresh, organic produce to individual families, to soup kitchens, and to organisations serving the poor.

Naeem Baig, executive director of the Islamic Circle of North America's Council for Social Justice told us of its United Against Hunger Campaign, launched last year to raise awareness of the 49 million Americans who do not have enough to eat.

It was the most successful grassroots campaign ICNA had ever run, he said, and caused such a stir that at least one imam reported being interrupted during Friday service as he read out details of the campaign by people who found the figures hard to comprehend.

Other food-related initiatives undertaken by faith communities include:

- encouraging people to grow their own food at home and in faith-owned gardens;
- organising farmers' markets to provide fresh, healthy produce for communities;
- providing educational initiatives to teach people about healthy eating or to cook;
- getting children to grow vegetables at school – and then eat them for lunch;
- re-connecting people with the land their food comes from through celebrations such as harvest festivals; and many more.

Others are just starting out on their deep consideration of food-related faith initiatives. The New Psalmist Baptist Church (NPBC), for example, has just moved into a new \$55million, 33acre site and is planning to erect hoop houses on its land to grow vegetables, as well as looking at other ways in which it can engage its community on sustainable food.

NPBC's James Morant made an important observation point when he pointed out that for many people of faith, struggling with issues such as trying to make ends meet and simply put food – any food – on the table for their families, whether it is sustainable or not may seem an irrelevant luxury. "I'm trying to think what I'd say to someone who's trying to deal with roaches and rats in their home," he said.

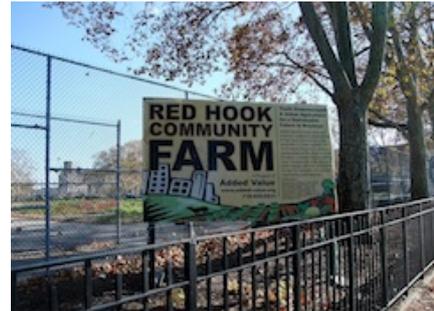
This sparked a big discussion about the complexity of the issues around sustainable food and what faiths should do. Finally, Sister Mary Ann Garisto leaned forward. "Just do what you can where you are in the simplest way possible," she said. Such clarity of thought and purpose could not be bettered.

Added Value urban farm

The workshop ended with a visit to an urban farm run by Added Value, an inspirational non-profit organisation that promotes sustainable development and provides training and employment opportunities to young people in Red Hook, South Brooklyn.

Co-founded by Ian Marvy, Added Value's Red Hook Community Farm – handily situated behind Ikea, so we were able to take the river taxi which serves the Swedish store – grows vegetables in a few inches of compost placed directly over the asphalt of the former playground where it is based.

But, invaluable though this fresh, healthy produce is to this deprived and neglected part of South Brooklyn, what Added Value really grows is people and community. It's a fine example of how food brings people together and nourishes a community in more ways than physical. For more information, click here. <http://www.added-value.org/>



The entrance to Added Value's urban farm on the site of an old asphalt playground

The workshop finished with the drafting of a collective declaration from all who attended:

Declaration

"As people of faith we share a reverence for creation and a sense of the sacredness of all life. We recognise our responsibilities to care for the Earth, our communities and our neighbours.

"Every faith celebrates food as a divine gift and every faith has something powerful to say about our role in protecting, preserving and respecting the natural world.

"We will honour our values in the food we eat and we will work to harness the power and influence of the world's faith communities, starting with our own, to create a fairer, healthier, sustainable food and farming system for all."