Before a meal we bow our heads. We are reminded of our ultimate dependence on God’s provision for this life, on farmers’ weathered hands and earthy knowledge, on healthy soils and blessed rainfall. We are reminded of an everyday miracle: take a seed in your hand, drop it in a shallow furrow of rich soil with adequate sunlight and water and you get a bountiful harvest of food.

Full shelves in the supermarket and meals on the table are not foregone conclusions. This abundance depends upon producers that steward and care for the land, the health of creation, and the mercy of God. By eating with this in mind, we nurture our gratitude during meals. We are reminded by author Sharon Parks of our “utter dependence upon the generosity of the earth and its peoples and the power and grace by which our lives are sustained.”

Growing Food As any gardener knows, nutrients, sunlight, space, and water are the main ingredients for creating great food. Maintaining fertile soil, controlling weeds, and decreasing pests and disease are key ingredients to farming sustainably, a practice that aims for environmental stewardship for current and future generations, farm profitability, and prosperous farming communities. Traditional farming methods often use synthetic chemicals to control pests, weeds, and disease. Increasingly, though, these chemicals are negatively impacting human health and the ability of the land to bring forth God’s bounty.

Our Food System Ironically, “traditional” farming methods are very modern. Up until about 50 years ago, food production in the United States was still very localized and low impact. The food system in the United States changed dramatically after World War II. Now, we are rapidly losing family farms, and most of our food is grown by corporate agriculture conglomerates that practice monoculture and the intensive application of synthetic chemicals. Our yearly use of pesticides has risen by 10 times since 1945 to more than 1 billion pounds.

Monoculture In farms across the country, large swaths of land are planted with long, straight rows of corn, wheat, or other major agricultural products. Most of these fields employ a type of cultivation called monoculture, meaning that large tracts of land grow only one crop. Monoculture can initially increase production, but has had negative consequences that are making many farmers look for alternatives. Monoculture systems are more susceptible to crop failure because of pests and disease.
crops also require labor-intensive input of synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides. This type of farming eliminates potential wildlife habitat and requires frequent, highly mechanized tilling. Not only does machinery for tilling consume large amounts of fossil fuels, but tilling soil contributes to global warming, increases erosion, and decreases soil quality.

**Farmworker Justice** Farmworkers in the United States are primarily seasonal workers. They follow the harvest, and perform backbreaking work to harvest 85 percent of the United States’ $28 billion produce industry. In the line of their work, they are exposed to high concentrations of chemicals that have been proven to cause cancer, neurological problems, and other health problems. A study published in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences found that women who have worked on farms are nearly three times more likely to develop breast cancer than those who have never worked on a farm.³

**New Farming Practices** To be good stewards of the land, some growers are changing their farming techniques, making use of historic as well as modern methods. Organic farmers rely on biological diversity in their fields to disrupt habitat for pests, are purposeful about maintaining and replenishing soil fertility, and do not use synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.

> Transportation of food accounts for 12 percent of each consumer’s carbon consumption, so choosing local food significantly decreases each person’s carbon footprint and helps mitigate global warming.

Another option available to growers is sustainable agriculture. Sustainable agriculture does not refer to a prescribed set of practices, rather it challenges producers to think about the long-term implications of practices and the broad interactions of agricultural systems. Producers have more flexibility to adopt good stewardship practices at a pace that is comfortable and economically feasible. Sustainable agriculture is often marked by certain sustainable practices like integrated pest management, crop rotation, no-till or low-till farming to preserve soil quality, rotational grazing, use of cover crops, and maintaining crop diversity. Any grower, regardless of past practices can make small changes to become more sustainable and a better steward to God’s creation.

**Protecting the Environment and Human Health** Well-managed agricultural land supplies important non-market goods and services. Farm and ranch lands provide food and cover for wildlife, help control flooding, protect wetlands and watersheds, and maintain air quality. Properly stewarded lands can also absorb and filter wastewater and return potable drinking water to rivers, wells, and underground aquifers. More sustainable practices also protect our own health and the health of others. Anything that we can do to decrease the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, non-medicinal antibiotics in animal farming, and high energy input farming (like large livestock operations), decreases our risk for developing cancer, immune deficiencies, bacterial resistance to important and life-saving antibiotics, asthma, and a host of other environmental health problems.

**Local Farms** Foods at the supermarket can spend 7 to 14 days in transit before they reach your market and travel an average of 1,500 miles.⁴,⁵ The varieties sold are chosen primarily for their ability to withstand industrial harvest equipment and survive long transport. A supermarket tomato is likely harvested when it was still green and hard and then sprayed with a hormone to make it ripen. In contrast, most local food is sold within 24 hours of its harvest, which dramatically increases its nutritional value and improves its flavor. Local farmers can grow a wider array of varieties providing consumers with choices, flavors, and nutrients that can’t be found at a supermarket.

**Justice in God’s Good Creation** As Christians, we recognize that all of creation, as God declares in the first chapter of Genesis, is “very good.” We also recognize the need, as people of faith, to care for those in poverty and to seek justice. Simply put, then, the kind of agriculture we support ought to reflect the goodness of God’s creation and call for justice and greater equity within the human community. When creation is degraded, when those who harvest our food cannot support their families or are exposed to harmful agricultural chemicals, then we, as Christians, have the responsibility to take action.

**Food as Sacrament** The sacramentality of food is perhaps seen most clearly in the Christian sacrament of communion, the Lord’s supper. Around the shared table of communion we take and bless the everyday elements of bread and wine, signifying Christ’s passion and reminding us of God’s provision of
Sermon Starters: Christ, the Good Bread

By Rev. Neddy Astudillo, Eco-Theologian and Presbyterian Pastor, Beloit, Wisconsin

Are we aware of the profound blessing to be found in each bite? Eating is the consummate whole experience—an act of survival, of pleasure, of community, and of spiritual renewal. Food is God’s bounty—an entire growing season’s worth of work by a farmer and the product of rain, sunshine, healthy soil, and God’s grace. Food is the creator’s genius, a veritable miracle on your plate. Food is holy. So is it food if it hurts us and creation? Christ, as the good bread, is a powerful metaphor for seeking a food system that is life giving, life sustaining, and community building.

Life Giving: “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you”… “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:26b-27a, 35)

Working with nature to produce our food makes us one with Christ in his desire to eternally and sustainably feed the world. Too often our food system works to dominate nature and mines the land of its life giving properties. Christ as the good bread makes us mindful of the many relationships that sustain us. Just as we live in Christ, we also exist as part of the natural world. Christ invites us to choose life, and leads us to see the many ways God brings forth life. Through the bread of life we become aware of our relationship with farmers, grains and living soils, the rain, the sun, pollinating and all the elements involved in our food production.

How have we become disconnected from our food? How can we become more related to it? How can the image of Christ as the good bread bring us back into life giving relationships?

Life Sustaining: “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.” (Psalm 65:9-13)

Creation has been teaching us about God’s ways since the beginning. God’s Holy Spirit works in community, involving all the elements of creation to provide bread for all God’s creatures and make life possible. When all creatures become aware of God’s providential presence, together we sing for joy. But our praise has been interrupted. We are losing our capability to know God when we destroy God’s creative world. Water no longer flows clear over pastures and neither can it provide healthy loaves and fish. Seeds have been robbed of their eternally life giving properties and turned into infertile commodities that can only be found in the market place.

How has creation’s praise been interrupted in your own neighborhood? How does your community praise God? How can you help bring all voices back to the choir?

Community Building: “Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters”… “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:5-6a, 7)

God came to live among us in Christ. He wandered the land and chose to live as an outsider. To avoid conforming to the teachings of the world, Christ invites us to live as foreigners wherever we are. The Old Testament teaches us that the earth is the Lord’s, but also invites us to love the land where God has sent us. We can never know how to care for creation as perfectly as God, but we can build a relationship with the land. God invited the Israelite exiles in Babylon to till and keep the land, just as they had done it in the promised land. When we begin to relate to the land we live in, love begins to grow and relationships are developed. A mindful life pours out the seeds of justice and peace, and the Reign of God begins to sprout across the earth.

Where there is community, there is wealth. Reflect upon the ways you care for the places you live in. How do these actions build relationships and community?
our daily bread. We ought to approach our dinner tables just as we approach the Lord’s table—reverently and fully aware of the implications of our meal.

Eating, then, is necessarily an expression of our faith. The choices that we make everyday about food may seem mundane and unimportant, but their impacts reverberate throughout our local and global communities and are pervasive in God’s creation. We can be blessed with sacramental moments when we consume our food in a certain way: more knowingly than ignorantly, more lovingly than greedily, more skillfully than clumsily, more reverently than destructively. When our daily bread is experienced and respected for the sacrament it is then we all have much to be thankful for.

THE FAITH RESPONSE: TAKING ACTION

**Buy Local** Purchasing locally produced food not only supports local farmers and economies, but also reduces the distance food travels (decreases fossil fuel consumption), and is more healthy and nutritious. Three good ways to find local foods:

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*Sustainable agriculture embraces organic agriculture in addition to intermediate steps in the transition from chemically-based, high synthetic-input agriculture to organic agriculture.*

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1. Visit your local farmer’s market or start one on your church grounds. To find local farmer’s markets visit the USDA’s farmer’s market web page at http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/.

2. Join a CSA—a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) is a partnership of mutual commitment between a farm and a community of supporters, who purchase harvest “shares” in the farm. Churches can be great drop-off points for customers participating in a CSA. To find CSAs in your area check with www.localharvest.org.

3. Talk to your supermarket manager about stocking more locally-produced foods.

**Buy Organic** Organic food is grown free from exposure to harmful chemicals and in such a way that maintains the health of the soil and the ecosystem in which the crops or livestock are raised.

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**Congregational Meals** Work to change your church’s institutional food purchasing practices and/or plan a local/organic potluck.

**Lift Your Voice** Local, state, and federal elected officials will soon consider farm bill legislation which impacts farmers, consumers and God’s creation. For information on current legislation and ways that you can speak out, visit www.nccecojustice.org

**REFLECTIONS FOR ADULT STUDY**

1. In 1920, about a third of the United States population lived on farms. Since 1935, the U.S. has lost 4.7 million family farms. Now there are fewer full time farmers than there are people in our prison system. Can you trace your family back to agriculture? How has food production changed since that time?

2. Do you feel a connection to the food you eat? The land and people that produce it? How?

   What do these verses teach us about creation and about caring for others?

4. Read John 6: 53b-58. Does the bread lose an important characteristic of its sacramental power when grain production contributes to significant agricultural runoff and related “dead zones” in coastal waterways? Does the wine lose an element of its sacramental essence when grapes are harvested by workers making significantly less than minimum wage?

5. Many denominations have policy statements on food and farming issues. Examine the policy of your faith tradition. Are you surprised? How can this inform your congregational ministry on these issues?
SENDING FORTH  
(Congregation echoes leader)

Leader: We stand in the midst of the burning world
Leader: Ready to sing out loud our praise and thanks to God the Provider
Leader: Primed to burn with compassionate love and justice for all
of the creation
Leader: Awakened to our fragile dependence on the plenty of creation
Leader: And seeing anew the world that is all of one flesh with us
All: Amen.
(portions adapted from a litany used by the Seekers Church on

THE FAITH RESPONSE: TAKING ACTION

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farmers and economies, but also reduces the distance (and thus the fossil
fuels burned) of transporting food and is more healthy and nutritious.
Three good ways to find local foods:
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   To find local farmers markets visit the USDA’s farmers market web
2. Join a CSA – a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) is a part-
   nership of mutual commitment between a farm and a community of
   supporters, who purchase harvest “shares” in the farm. Churches can
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3. Talk to your supermarket manager about stocking more locally-pro-
   duced foods.

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chemicals and in such a way that maintains the health of the soil and the
ecosystem in which the crops or livestock are raised.

Congregational Meals. Work to change your church’s institutional
food purchasing practices and/or plan a local/organic potluck.

Lift Your Voice. Local, state, and federal elected officials will con-
side legislation that impacts God’s creation, especially in the Farm Bill,
which impacts both farmers and consumers. For information on current
legislation and ways that you can speak out, visit www.nccecojustice.org

At the Lord’s Table: Everyday Thanksgiving

National Council of Churches USA Eco-Justice Program

When we sit down to a meal it
should be with gratitude
for what we have been given. The
very act of eating instills thank-
giving and calls us to right rela-
tionship with our “neighbors”—the
farmers and rural communities and the rest
of creation that provides rich soil and clean water
necessary for growing our food. We aim to create a world where agricul-
ture and the ways we obtain our food honors all—honors the livelihoods
of farmers and rural communities, honors our dependence on rich soil
and clean water, honors our interdependence with God’s creation. When
we do so, eating, and food itself, becomes a sacrament ushering an aware-
ness of the holy into everyday life. We can be blessed with sacramental
moments when we consume our food in a certain way: more knowingly
than ignorantly, more lovingly than greedily, more skillfully than clums-
ily, more reverently than destructively. When our daily bread is experi-
enced and respected for the sacrament it can be—especially then—we all
have much to be thankful for.

Working land—farm and ranch land—occupies more than half
of the land mass of the United States. And no fewer than every single
person in the United States depends upon food to live. Every person de-
pends on the health of the air, soil, and water to bring forth life, depends
upon the farmers who work the land, and most importantly depends on
God to provide the bounty that we have come to expect. Thanks be to
the creator for the knowlege that God will never fail us.

For more information on how you can help protect God’s creation, visit
the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program website at www.
nccecojustice.org. Contact: kgalles@nccusa.org/202-481-6943
CALL TO WORSHIP
Leader: Awaken!
The new day reveals itself in every moment,
And by the grace of God all things are made possible
Come, let us give thanks.

All: We give thanks to you, blessed, mysterious Life-giver,
For one more day to experience the miracle of creation.

Women: With every breath we remember that life is a gift,
And we give thanks.

Men: With every step
We know the wonder of walking on the Earth,
And we give thanks.

Leader: With every word
We affirm God’s transforming love for each of us,
And we give thanks.

All: Holy Beloved, through you all things are made new.
Creation is full of your glory. All praise be yours!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
(after each intercession, congregation responds, “Lord, Hear Our Prayer”)
Leader: For all nations of the world that they may be good stewards of
the earth and employ wise practices as they bring forth food.

Leader: For your body, the church, that we may share the Gospel as we
work for justice for all of your creation that reaches beyond our communi-
ties into rural communities, into the family farm, into the homes of farm
workers, into wildlife habitat, into the air, the water, the soil, the seed.

Leader: For our congregation and congregations in rural communi-
ties that we may recognize and minister to those who cannot support a
family, who suffer the threat of foreclosure, and other kinds of economic
dislocation in our society.

Leader: For the farmers and people in farm-related businesses who suffer
from depression and feelings of powerlessness.

Leader: For rural and small town communities, especially that we all may
work together to build a sustainable future where the food we eat is as
good and honorable as God’s creation that makes our food possible.

Leader: For those who farm the land, that they may see their labor as
participation in God’s creative activity in the world.

Leader: For the hungry, that they may not be forgotten as we work for
justice for farmers.

All: Amen

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING
Gracious God, you who supply your people with every blessing in abun-
dance, lift up our hearts in gratitude and thanksgiving this day. We praise
you for the gifts of our everyday lives—for food on the table, for overflow-
ing supermarkets, for fresh fruits and vegetables. Help us to thank you
and to glorify your name for how you have watched over us through years
of seedtime and of harvest. Hear our prayer, and help us to live as one
with your creation, ever aware that you have entrusted it to us to steward
in your stead. With grateful hearts, we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen

PRAYER OF CONFESSION
Kind God, We have taken the fruits of your creation and your merciful
abundance for granted. We have uttered prayers of thanks without gra-
titude. We have taken often of gifts that we seldom notice. We have failed
to open our eyes to the suffering of those who produce our food. We
have allowed ourselves to become separate from our food. We understand
that we are utterly dependent on you and your bounty. For these things,
we ask for Your forgiveness, O God. Open to us a new future in which
we can grow in your likeness and image, like fields of corn stretching
heavenward, through Jesus Christ, the sunlight, water, seed, and rich soil
of the world. Amen.

ASSURANCE
Leader: In loving compassion, We are blessed and made whole.
In loving compassion, We are fed and we are nourished.
In loving compassion, We are forgiven and we are wrapped
in the warm embrace of God as we go forth

To do justice

All: Amen.
IDEAS FOR YOUTH

Plant a Vegetable or Container Garden Use a corner of your church grounds to become a local food producer. Or, if you congregation is space-limited consider container gardening. First-hand experience with growing food is important to understanding that food does not come from the supermarket. Use your fresh produce for church meals, distribute it to shut-ins, or donate it as part of your hunger ministry. *Note: This is a great project for youth and adults to undertake together!*

Make a Corn Husk Cross Throughout history in many different cultures, good luck harvest figures were made to celebrate the harvest and insure a good one the following year. Explain to youth, that we know that we don’t need good luck for a good harvest, we know that we can depend on the generosity of God. Tell them that they will be making a harvest figure, but that their figure will be a cross. Instead of a good luck charm, what might the harvest cross signify? You can find dried cornhusks at any craft store, and many supermarkets during the fall. If necessary, soak cornhusks in water to make them pliable. Give each participant two or three long pieces of cornhusk. Ask them to place them on top of one another and fold them in thirds lengthwise. Then ask them to fold this long narrow piece in half. This will be the long arm of the cross. Give each student two pieces of yarn. Ask them to tie the first piece near the top fold, about a fourth of the way down. Distribute a smaller piece of corn husk and explain that this will be the short arm of the cross. Fold this piece of corn husk in half or thirds lengthwise, and then in half again, so that it is shorter than the first husks. Slide this piece in between the main fold of the long arm of the cross beneath the first piece of yarn. Tie the second piece of yarn below the short arm to complete the cross.

*Organic Farming foregoes certain practices that are environmentally damaging and pose human health risks such as using pesticides and chemical fertilizers, growing genetically modified organisms, and using antibiotics and hormones. Food that is certified organic is regulated according to rules set by certifying agencies.*

“To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration…in such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.”

Wendell Berry

Emphasize Everyday Connections to Farms and God’s Creation Read the story of the fish and loaves in a children’s story Bible, or from the text (Matthew 14: 13-21). Talk about the miracle. Bring a number of food and fiber items with you, including fresh produce, meat, dairy, processed foods, a cotton t-shirt, and some paper. Perishable food items can be represented by their packaging (e.g. egg carton). Make teams of three. Put each item in an opaque paper bag, and distribute them to the teams. Have the teams write down ten words to describe each item. Then have teams take turns presenting their item(s) and making the rest of the teams guess what is in the bag. When each item is revealed talk about what farm crops or animals are needed to have the item. When all of the items have been revealed place them all in the middle of the classroom and ask the youth what life would be like if we didn’t have any of these things. Ask them if they think it’s a modern day miracle that God has provided so generously for us. Explain to them that God has been generous in many ways. It is important that we are thankful for all that we’ve been given and that we treat creation with love and care so that God can continue to provide for us. Talk about some farming practices used for items in the room and more sustainable alternatives.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND FURTHER STUDY

Sustainable Table—a consumer education website with background on the issues of sustainable agriculture, recipes, and the Eat Well Guide to help you find sustainably-raised meat and dairy products: www.sustainabletable.org

Food Routes—a website dedicated to reintroducing Americans to their food – the seeds that it comes from, the farmers that grow it, and the routes that carry it from field to table: www.foodroutes.org
Local Harvest—a directory of small farms, farmers markets, and other local food sources searchable by zip code: www.localharvest.org

Earth Ministry—a faith-based creation care organization with excellent food and farming resources, including a book of essays with study guide, “Food and Faith: Justice, Joy, and Daily Bread”: www.earthministry.org/food_and_farming.htm

American Farmland Trust—an organization of farmers, ranchers, conservationists, and others dedicated to protecting farmland from misuse and development: www.farmland.org

Farm and Food Policy Project—a broad coalition (including the NCC) of organizations seeking policy solutions to agriculture problems through reform of the next Farm Bill: www.farmandfoodproject.org

For more information on how you can help protect God's creation visit the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program website at www.nccecojustice.org. Contact: kgalles@nccusa.org/202-481-6943

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Endnotes
2 The Smithsonian Institution, National Zoological Park.
4 Auburn University Sustainability Initiative.