

HARVEST 2017 – MAKING FARMING REAL

Who we are

Agricultural Christian Fellowship is an association of Christians connected with farming and related matters. It exists to provide mutual support, as a forum for work on the ethical and human issues arising around farming, food and the environment. It also seeks to engage other Christians in these issues and to influence public and political opinion. Over 20 years ago it joined with the Arthur Rank Centre at Stoneleigh in founding the Farming Community Network (FCN) which is a Christian ministry to farming people in any sort of difficulty. They also produce resources for churches for occasions such as Harvest Festival. Details are at the end of this letter. FCN is now a separate charity but relationships are close.

Why we are writing to you

Farming always has many peculiarities, problems and potentials, but the current situation has produced a new crop of issues and uncertainties and so we are writing to explain some of these.

Basic Realities

Farming outputs are unpredictable and often dependent on factors beyond our control, such as weather. Production is a long-term process which, once started cannot be reversed. Prices are also unpredictable. Some products like grain can be stored until a more favourable moment to sell whilst others like milk must be sold as soon as they are produced. The *food chain* is more like an old fashioned egg timer, where the produce of many farmers passes through a small number of large processors or retailers to many consumers. This gives control of the whole market to those in the middle. Currency exchange rates are equally unpredictable and can affect farm gate prices substantially.

Over the years there has been a tendency for farm incomes to go down, whilst land values have gone up. Neither trend benefits long-term farmers, but one makes them look increasingly rich. Note that tenant farmers own neither land nor home and as a result of increasing land values face increased rents as landlords seek to maintain their return on investment. A consequence of these trends is that an average size farm can often no longer sustain two generations of family at once, especially if the farm is rented or carries considerable debt as is now frequently the

case. Both issues impact on the family's ability to organize an orderly succession plan.

BREXIT

So how do the uncertainties of Brexit impact on all this? It is very unclear, at this stage, what is going to happen, but here are a few indicators.

- An immediate short-term result of the referendum has been a devaluation of the pound, which has raised some farm prices by about 10%, lessening the impact of earlier dramatic reductions in prices.
- For many farmers the EU support payments make up all or most of their income, including the part they need to continue farming. Loss of these subsidies will have a serious impact, and it is not clear what might replace them.
- There is a ring of tariffs around the EU on many food products. If the UK ends up outside this ring then it will be much harder to sell grain to Spain or Portugal or sheep to France. If there are no tariffs around the UK farming will then be exposed to products imported from wherever in the world they can be produced most cheaply.
- Products associated with poor animal welfare, oppressive labour conditions or abuse to the environment might more easily gain access to the UK market. There may also be issues around products such as hormone injected beef.
- Farming and food could be a giveaway bargaining chip in Trade Negotiations for more lucrative and politically high profile industrial and financial products.

All of this is part of a cloud of uncertainty and likely to cause more stress for farmers.

Administration

There is one other connected reality which is potentially curable. In recent years there have been a number of failures in the administration of agriculture, both to do with payments due to farmers and to do with regulation. The impression has been conveyed to UK farmers that much of this has arisen from Brussels. However, work to help farmers untangle themselves has often revealed that this was not the case, with many of the issues being home-grown in Westminster.

At present, there appears to be an administrative layer and bureaucratic mindset that adds to the difficulties facing farmers rather than easing their burden, especially when government rigidities or fixations have a higher priority than finding practical solutions to real problems. The creation of computerized and centralized control systems, appear to become the dominant consideration, rather than the farmers and land they interact with. Compulsory schemes, which sometimes fail to fit or function properly entangle considerable numbers of farmers in confusion, anguish, financial difficulty and possibly debt. This leads to a considerable proportion of FCN's workload, with FCN volunteers around the country frequently encountering

individuals in crisis caused by these issues. The voluntary schemes are increasingly complex with a centralized rigidity which by virtue of their design exclude many smaller overworked farmers. Both types cause overwork and frustration to both farmers and the Government staff who have to operate them. These staff are frequently helpful, and concerned but are often equally frustrated by the constraints and restrictions imposed upon them and by the poorly devised administrative systems.

Farmers and communities

We are sending these thoughts to you in the hope that you might understand better many of the issues facing your local farmers. Farmers are only a small part of the population, even in rural areas. Yet their activity impacts on the landscape, wildlife habitat and water catchments in the countryside and both those and also the food they produce are all fundamental to our very existence. Add to this the fact they are often one of the more permanent parts of rural communities, then it becomes clear that farmers play a significant part in those communities.

What can I do?

Circumstances vary but some of the things below may be appropriate in your situation.

- Share this information with colleagues and others
- Try to buy local and fairly traded produce and encourage others to do the same. Farmer's markets and local retailers are good sources (and not always more expensive than supermarkets).
- Try to build relationships with the local farmers to better understand the issues they face, and if appropriate offer support and encouragement.
- Be aware of food and farming issues at a national level.
- There is a book published by ACF called *Honey and Thistles*, which explores many of these issues more deeply (see below for details of book). Consider forming an interest group around these issues.
- Explore the harvest material that FCN have produced (see below). Many of you may already have had a letter from FCN about this.

Final Reflection

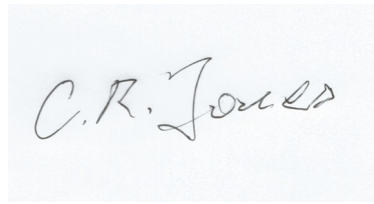
Much economic thought seems to assume that whoever controls a part of the world's resources owns them utterly, for exploitation by their own generation. In reality of course this cannot be true, and the Earth truly is the Lord's, now and in the future. Those who manage any part of it have a duty of stewardship in partnership with God.

There is a threefold pattern of relationships running through the Bible involving God, ourselves, and the rest of creation and farmers have a significant role in this. So we in turn should do everything possible to support them with that responsibility.

We need to build a future based on the Common Good where “The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest” Psalm 85:12.
This comes with best wishes for you in your work.



John Plumb
Chairman of ACF



Christopher Jones MBE
ACF National Coordinator

Contacts and Resources

Agricultural Christian Fellowship

Manor Farm, West Haddon, Northamptonshire, NN6 7AQ

Tel: 01788 510800

Email: cj@agriculturalchristianfellowship.org.uk

Web: www.agriculturalchristianfellowship.uk

Publication from ACF: <http://honeyandthistles.uk>

The Farming Community Network

Manor Farm, West Haddon, Northamptonshire, NN6 7AQ

Tel: 01788 510866

Email: mail@fcn.org.uk

Web: <http://fcn.org.uk>

Resources for Harvest and other occasions from FCN:

<http://fcn.org.uk/resources/detail/118>