

Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice **2011 Statement of Conscience**

Aware of our interdependence, we acknowledge that eating ethically requires us to be mindful of the miracle of life we share with all beings. With gratitude for the food we have received, we strive to choose foods that minimize harm and are protective of the environment, consumers, farmers, and all those involved in food production and distribution.

Environmental justice includes the equitable distribution of both environmental burdens and benefits for populations of residents and workers. Marginalized people have often been able to find housing or work only in areas exposed to environmental pollutants, with consequent negative health and quality of life effects.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to address our relationship with food. Our Principles call for recognition of and respect for the other. As we search freely and responsibly for truth, meaning, and spiritual wholeness, we will make a variety of individual choices about food. Ethical eating is the application of our Principles to our food choices. What and how we eat has broad implications for our planet and society. Our values, Principles, and integrity call us to seek compassion, health, and sustainability in the production of food we raise or purchase.

Food production involving growing, processing, packaging, transporting, and distributing food has become a vast worldwide industry. The mass production of food often maximizes production while minimizing price. This mass production has greatly increased food supply, but has resulted in the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides with crops and the mistreatment of animals and workers in food production. Both this overuse and the large waste streams from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) result in pollution of water, land, and air.

Access to an adequate supply of healthy food and clean water is a basic human need and right. Many people do not have adequate food, while others have a surplus. In many locations, poor distribution of food is a major contributor to hunger and malnutrition. The effects of climate change, weather conditions, and armed conflicts can also expose many people to starvation. Paradoxically, an abundance of food does not guarantee access to healthy food.

We acknowledge that aggressive action needs to be taken that will ensure an adequate food supply for the world population; reduce the use of energy, water, fertilizer, pesticides, and hormones in food production; mitigate climate change; and end the inhumane treatment of animals. These steps call for an evolution of our eating habits to include more locally grown, minimally processed whole foods. We acknowledge that this evolution must respect diversity in cultures, nutritional requirements, and religious practices.

Minimally processed plant-based diets are healthier diets. Some of us believe that it is ethical only to eat plants while others of us believe that it is ethical to eat both plants and animals. We do not call here for a single dietary approach. We encourage a knowledgeable choice of food based on understanding the demands of feeding a growing world population, the health effects of particular foods, and the consequences of production, worker treatment, and transportation methods. We commit to applying this knowledge to both personal and public actions, recognizing that many of us might embark on a dramatic change in eating choices and some might pay more for food that is ethically produced. For congregations, helping congregants gain this understanding and supporting their choices will require a long-term collective process of engagement, education, discernment, and advocacy. Unitarian Universalists aspire to radical hospitality and developing the beloved community. Therefore, we affirm that the natural world exists not for the sole benefit of one nation, one race, one gender, one religion, or even one species, but for all. Working in the defense of mutual interests, Unitarian Universalists acknowledge and accept the challenge of enlarging our circle of moral concern to include all living creatures.

As individuals and as congregations, we recognize the need to examine the impact of our food choices and our practices and make changes that will lighten the burden we place on the world. We also recognize that many food decisions will require us to make trade-offs between competing priorities. These priorities include: taste, selection, price, human health, environmental protection, sustainability, adequate food supply, humane treatment of animals used for food, and fair treatment of farm and food workers.

Environmental concerns include the use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and hormones and high volumes of animal wastes produced by CAFOs, all of which can contaminate soil, air, and water. Contributors to global warming include the overreliance on fossil fuels for food production; the methane produced by animals, including but not limited to cattle, sheep, and pigs; and the long-distance transport of food. Expanding agriculture and animal farming often removes natural habitats and reduces natural biodiversity. An additional environmental concern is the deterioration of the oceans and their life forms due to overfishing and pollution.

Human Health concerns include producers' use of growth promoters, pesticides, and antibiotics that can affect child development, antibiotic resistance, and other health conditions. Advertising and marketing can encourage overeating, poor food choices, a focus on body image that can contribute to eating disorders, and the use of infant formula in preference to breast feeding.

Concerns about the **Humane Treatment of Animals** include intensive confinement and abuse in CAFOs, and inhumane conditions during production, transport, and slaughter.

Concerns about the **Fair Treatment of Food and Farm Workers** include low pay, poor and unsafe working conditions, exploitation of undocumented workers, and enslavement of others.

Policy concerns include agricultural subsidies that reward the production of certain crops and animal products that are less healthful and environmentally friendly than unsubsidized ones and that penalize small to moderate-sized farming operations. Agricultural subsidies of exported crops have driven small farmers in developing countries off their land. The consequences of agricultural subsidies and mono-cropping include increased gender disparity where women have been the traditional agricultural producers. We recognize replicating corporate agricultural modes in our aid to developing countries is not in the best interest of humanity. We support the development of farming models that safeguard the environment, produce safe foods, provide economic benefits to all economic levels, and create environmentally and economically sustainable models.

Classism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are deeply connected to economic justice, which is a prime determinant of access to food. Some of us will not be able to pay more for ethical food. Others of us will. Yet all of us can have a role in improving the ethics of food. We affirm that the fight for environmental and economic justice is inherently a fight against all forms of oppression. As a result, ethical eating requires different ways of thinking about these issues that reflect their interconnected nature, and we understand that this work will require creativity, patience, and resolve.

Calls To Action

Individual Actions

Recognizing that individual circumstances vary, we aspire to buy, raise, and consume food for ourselves and our families that:

- increases our proportionate consumption of plant-based foods, which increases the global access to calories, provides health benefits, and prevents injuring animals;
- minimizes the pain and suffering of animals by purchasing meat or seafood produced under humane conditions, for those who choose to eat meat or seafood;

- minimizes the negative environmental effects of raising animals or plants by purchasing organically produced food, and seafood certified as responsibly farmed or harvested;
- minimizes transportation-related carbon dioxide emissions by obtaining foods locally produced through home or community gardens, farmers markets, or community supported agriculture (CSA);
- provides farm workers with living wages and safe working environments;
- contributes to social harmony by encouraging communal eating;
- promotes health, consuming food in quantities that do not lead to obesity; and

We advocate for the benefit of animals, plants, food workers, the environment and humanity by:

- purchasing fair trade--certified products as available.
- asking food sellers and producers to label where their products come from to determine distance of transport and whether the products were irradiated or contain Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs);
- pressing food sellers to require that their suppliers certify the humane treatment of animals;
- supporting legislation that requires the labeling of products that are irradiated or contain Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), distribution of adequate ethical food supplies, effective safety inspection of food production, and realignment of agricultural subsidies to support growing more produce and the viability of small farmers; and
- protecting and encouraging organic food production and its producers.

Congregational Actions

As congregations, we aspire to:

- provide and sell more plant-based, organic, locally produced, and fair trade foods at congregational events;
- promote economic accessibility to safe, ethically produced food by organizing members to work for food justice through activities such as: urging grocery chains to locate stores in low income neighborhoods, supporting local food co-ops, helping people obtain food stamps, advocating for increased funding to alleviate hunger, and assisting local meals on wheels and food bank programs;
- support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, and other relevant UU organizations in their efforts to ensure that everyone has adequate nutritious food, produced sustainably;
- provide educational programs for all ages that address the issues of environmental justice, world hunger, gardening, food preparation, and nutrition;
- become Green Sanctuary – accredited and include ethical eating in programs;
- advocate for healthful food for school and other institutional meals; and
- engage in direct action in solidarity with workers and labor advocacy groups to support agricultural and food workers.

With gratitude and reverence for all life, we savor food mindful of all that has contributed to it. We commit ourselves to a more equitable sharing of the earth's bounty.