

# Local Food, Local Church

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Jeremiah 29:5-7  
Psalm 65: 9-13

A few years ago Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen gave me an article by Barbara Kingsolver about genetic diversity. As I read it I was immediately drawn to what this might mean for the church: we need diversity to keep us healthy, we need a storehouse of "old seeds" for the lean times, it makes sense to pay attention to what grows well in the soil and weather of our own region. This biological example gave me a new appreciation for the variety we need in the church, even though the diversity might make me uncomfortable sometimes.

Well, Kristi and Barbara have done it again. On May 1 I went to the National cathedral with Kristi to hear Barbara Kingsolver talk about her new book "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle." This latest book is the story of the year that Kingsolver and her family spent eating local foods, much of it grown by them on their small Virginia farm. Kristi and a friend did their own month long suburban experiment just before Hannah was born in 2005 and wrote about it for Mother Earth News. There are a few copies of the article on the foyer table.

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/Whole-Foods-and-Cooking/2006-08-01/Suburban-Foraging-Two-Families-Eat-Only-Local.aspx>

As I listened to Barbara read from her book, I was again taken to the realms of theology and ecclesiology. I have never been good at science, I have never lived on a farm and being a preachers' kid and now a pastor myself, I have spent way too much time in church, maybe that is why I insist on making these circuitous connections. Maybe you too will see the common roots here from the earth, from God's creation.

Reading Kingsolver's book is an uncomfortable challenge. It is not that her ideas are new; grow the food you eat, or buy it from your neighbors. It's how we all lived for thousands of years. Even by the interstate in small town Oregon where I grew up we had a garden that provided much of our food all summer long. We ate what was in season, and my parents bought food from local farmers to can, freeze and dry for the winter. We wouldn't have dreamed of buying fresh strawberries in January or eating fresh green beans in March though we picked pounds and pounds of them in season. (One of my favorite family activities was shelling peas under the plum tree in early summer.)

Wonderful and idyllic as it all was, there was a thrill of the forbidden when as an adult I could buy fresh green beans year round from the grocery store. Then along come Kristi, and Mary Beth Lind and Cathleen Hockman (with the Simply in Season cookbook) and now Barbara Kingsolver to remind me that the lavishness of fresh vegetables and fruit year round is a luxury the earth cannot afford. Imagine the transportation costs to truck our fresh foods across the continent. The fossil fuels that we use to bring our genetically modified food to us after it has been sitting unripened in the vehicle for a week are running out. The people that grow this stuff are putting the family farmers out of business; highly subsidized agribusinesses have taken over the food production in this country and farther. Kingsolver and Kristi can articulate many more reasons to eat local. But the simple fact for the eater on the East Coast is that

though a California strawberry may be gigantic, there really is no comparison in flavor to those small little gems we get locally.

To grow one's own food takes extra time and effort. Even to be a member of a CSA, Community Supported Agriculture farm, takes some work. There is so much to learn about composting, when to plant, how to harvest, and of course learning new recipes for cooking all that kale. It means pulling weeds and getting our hands dirty, maybe even getting dirt in the house. To get serious about eating local food takes time and energy most of just don't have. This is to not say there aren't great rewards personally and globally but really growing your own food, even a small patch of herbs and tomatoes like we have in the front yard, is to go against the grain of how city people do things. (And I haven't even mentioned raising your own eggs, chickens, turkeys or other meat.) Sophisticated, dare we say educated, people eat foods from around the world, not from their back (or front) yards.

So I wondered, as I ate my banana from Costa Rica, what is the connection between what we eat and how we do church?

HMC's 50th anniversary book written by Gene Miller is titled "Taking Root in Strange Soil." It turns out that it was Sara Fretz Goering's father, Winfield Fretz, who thought that city soil was not habitable for Mennonites. To be Mennonite was to be inextricably tied to the rich land. Taking his images from Jesus' parable Fretz said the city soil was "too hard, stony and shallow" for Mennonites to survive in.

Yet here we are 55 years later, quite Mennonite by our own humble assessment and still growing and thriving. Does soil make all the difference? Or is it the seeds? How have we been able to keep this church growing? It is true that it does not look like a church in rural PA might. How we nurture our congregational life together might be a bit different than the methods used by churches in Newton, KS. How we do church and how we understand God, our ecclesiology and theology, may have a different flavor than what grows in upstate New York. Does that mean that it is wrong? That it is not genuine?

As a congregation we have resisted the megachurch model (would that be like agribusiness) where formulas are used to make the church grow, technology is used to lure the consumer -- members, to worship; where going to church might mean sitting at the coffee bar with neighbors and watching the worship feed from a remote location. We have had the audacity to say that church staff shouldn't do all the work, that the congregation should make decisions not just the pastor. We even believe, and practice, that people in the pew have something to preach about and the opportunity, even obligation, to respond to the preacher. At various points in our congregational life we have resisted direction given from the conference, as we felt they did not understand our theology and the context in which we do ministry. So three cheers for us, we are a local church. We have not sold out to big business. We like our locally grown kale and organic sermons.

Still could we go further? We read of one situation not quite like ours in the passage from Jeremiah this morning. Jeremiah is talking to the people of Israel who have been in exile for several generations, feeling miserable and trying to figure out how to maintain their identity when in captivity. His instruction is to make a home there, plant, eat, marry, and have children. He says, "seek the welfare of the city" and in its peace you shall find your peace. (Some of you may remember that this was the theme for our 50th anniversary celebration 5 years ago.)

It reminds me a bit of Becca and Kristin moving to Southeast DC. They could have done like some other newcomers down the block from them, moving in quietly, keeping to themselves, not interacting with their neighbors, staying inside where it is “safe.” But being who they are, Becca and Kristin have befriended their neighbors, invite them to parties, carve pumpkins with the children, take them to doctors, help them with home repair and make sure they have Christmas presents. In the peace of their neighbors they find their peace. With this kind of community network they don’t need a security system, they have built one from the ground up.

Still what does eating local food have to do with local church? Is it good for the body of Christ at Hyattsville to eat mostly the food that comes our way from those big conglomerates, “the evangelical left or right”? Shall we plant the seeds that are sent to us from denominational headquarters in Newton, Elkhart or Akron? Do we take our cues about what a healthy barnyard looks like from small towns in South Dakota or Virginia? Or do we look at the farm right here in Prince Georges County and see what grows best in this soil, noting the native species.

I am not suggesting that we throw out the bible, ignore our history as Anabaptists, or refuse to give and receive counsel from those outside this congregation. That would be foolish. What I am suggesting is that we look at the needs here in our neighborhood, and contemplate how we might be a part of seeking the peace of this ground where we have been planted. This congregation did that 30 years ago when a committed group took note that there was a real need for housing and resources for adults with developmental disabilities. The vision was shared and Jubilee Association has been growing and thriving ever since. In the 1980’s when many people were fleeing civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala a small group working on Central American issues helped lead the congregation to the decision of being a sanctuary congregation for illegal immigrants.

Fifteen years ago we noticed what was already growing and became part of that planting and harvesting year after year. We have been serving with Community Café and Warm Nights Ministries and each year new people from the congregation catch this vision of seeking the peace. It has been good to work together, and with other churches, to provide food and shelter to people in need.

As we look out at our local field I wonder if it is time to dream a new dream, to notice how we might again be involved in planting and harvesting.

Historically we in the west have seen ourselves as the benefactors to the churches in other countries. In return we have received the joy of giving. But most often we have not been open to receiving much more than that. In a recent mailing, Executive Secretary of MCUSA, Jim Schrag, proposes that as congregations we relate to congregations in other parts of the world directly, as mutual partners in the Christian life. As we relate to our sister church, Remanso de Paz in Colombia, we are plowing new ground. We do not send them money, as much as we might want to. We do not send missionaries to teach them the gospel. Instead we exchange visits and welcome each other’s pastors to the pulpit. We listen to their story and try to make it known here in this country. The support we offer is spiritual and they in turn challenge us spiritually, inviting us to look at our priorities, how we live our lives individually and as a community. With them we ask the question, “How does a deeper awareness of the

violence and pain in the world move us toward peacemaking? How does calling people in war torn Colombia (or the wealthy United States in their case) our sisters and brothers move us toward peacemaking in our own community?"

Working with "farmers" living in a city across the globe may seem a strange way to do local church. Yet if we open our hands to receive the tools and seeds they share with us for cultivation it can be a rich collaboration. What if we looked more carefully at how our sister church is seeking the welfare of the city in which they are in exile? Unlike our choice to be in the city, our sisters and brothers truly are in exile in Sincelejo, having fled their homes in the mountains because of the ongoing civil war. Where would modeling ourselves on their ministry lead us in terms of our own dreams for the future of this congregation?

Of course eating local food and doing local church is no picnic. It is inherently messy work. We get dirty as we dig and plant. We work long hours in the hot sun pulling weeds and harvesting in season. We risk planting new crops, maybe even returning to the old crops that have almost been obliterated by agribusiness and modern megachurches. In the long run, a commitment to local food and local church means being good stewards of the earth by caring for God's creation and creatures. And you can't beat the fresh flavor.