

FOOD: there's a story behind everything we eat
10th annual conference of the Quakers and Business Group

Some reflections from the organisers

The tenth annual conference of the Quakers and Business Group provided us with an opportunity to focus on food and where it comes from. Most of the participants having read a pre-conference briefing document (attached), we started by looking at pictures of plates of fish and chips, of chicken tikka and rice and of apple pie and custard – in each case tracing back where the ingredients came from and their impact on livestock, on the planet and on people. Fish takes us into the marine environment, chips back to potatoes and oilseed rape, chickens to think about the broiler industry, custard is made up from eggs (think battery cages), milk (think mega dairies and the loss of small dairy farms) and sugar (think diabetes and obesity).

We were reminded that the road from farm to fork is a jigsaw stretching from farmers and fishermen, through traders, bankers, manufacturers and traders to retailers – each one a risk-taking business and an employer. Today's Quakers may prefer the caring professions but the food chain demonstrates that we need to re-engage with the world of business, as did our forebears, and help to rebuild faith in food.

We wanted Lincolnshire farmer John Turner to describe the way in which markets shape today's farming, where farming currently finds itself, where many would like to see it develop and the practical steps for making that transition. He highlighted the difficulties of sticking to the core values of the nurturer when squeezed by policy, legislation and subsidy. He raised the practical difficulties of getting the spirit of good farming recognised in the market, asked how Quaker values can be reflected within the food chain before reminding us that there are many good things happening as people become more discerning and look for new ways of purchasing food. He mentioned the Quaker involvement in the establishment of the Pasture-fed Livestock Association (www.pasturefed.org) with its focus on raising ruminant livestock solely on pasture and the transparency of the supply chain.

We asked Compassion in World Farming's Philip Lymbery to describe what he had learned in travelling the world to write his book FARMAGEDDON (a summary of which is attached), which focuses on the increase in industrial farming. Despite some disheartening stories, he spoke positively about the opportunities for change and what we can do as individuals.

We asked Colin Tudge, writer and founder of the Campaign for Real Farming, to demonstrate that it is quite feasible to feed a growing world population, projected to be 9 billion by 2050, without destroying the planet. There are huge inefficiencies in the food system arising from wastage, from feeding grain and fish to livestock and from both policy and market distortions. But this will require a modal shift to farming **WITH** nature rather than seeking to control it, to repopulating the land and to us paying a price for food that reflects its true cost to people and planet. He encouraged us to attend the Oxford Real Farming Conference (www.orfc.org.uk) which provides the opportunity to mingle with farmers and growers, scientists, economists and others who share the vision of an agricultural renaissance.

We asked Sally Bagenal, co-founder and the first CEO of the Organic Milk Suppliers' Cooperative, to describe her experience of building a milk collection and distribution business in order to give some collective strength to farmers who traditionally are price takers. She described the unhappy experience of negotiating with one of the major supermarkets, nine of which control 95% of food sales in the UK. We learnt that their focus groups showed that the majority of people are not interested in where their food comes from, have made their minds

up on what type of food to purchase before entering the supermarket and focus their decisions around price.

We asked author and former Reuters' journalist Patrick Chalmers, together with former editor of The Friend Judy Kirby, to explain how we can use easily accessible and low cost social media to become citizen journalists and spread our messages of change.

After lunch we split into four groups, each led by one of the speakers. Conscious that there is a limit to what can be achieved in an hour, we felt that the first priority was for people to learn more about each others' interests and experience and then to consider four questions:

- Where will change come from?
- What will change look like?
- Where will it begin?
- What can each of us do?

We noted that many individuals and organisations are already engaged in developing solutions. Many successful examples were shared, although often these are happening on a relatively small scale. There was an overwhelming feeling that information was a key element in each of the areas that the groups were considering, both in understanding the issues and learning about what opportunities are available to bring about change.

At the end of the day we saw four films that had been made during the conference, by and about conference participants and using only a mobile phone and microphone. There will be an opportunity to learn more about becoming a citizen journalist at the Q&BG Spring gathering on 18th April 2015, which is to be held at Northampton Meeting House.

Food and farming are huge subjects to consider in a period of 7 hours. With participants varying from those who knew little to those who are engaged directly in various sectors, we felt that there was a danger of some being overwhelmed by detail and others feeling the content was too simplistic. To us the priority was for those coming fresh to the subject to have the opportunity to learn and to talk to those who knew more, to raise interest amongst Quakers about where their food comes from and to highlight the work of the many groups already engaged in working for better food. A list of many of them can be found at the umbrella group SUSTAIN (see <http://bit.ly/1u5E1b1>).

Our objectives and expectations were modest. Our hope was that, at the end of the day, people would leave:

- better informed
- actively engaged with food-related issues
- empowered to do something, as a result of their increased knowledge and improved communication skills,
- aware of organisations already involved in promoting change that we can support
- more aware of how Quaker values apply to food and farming

We hope that people left believing that they can influence the food chain through what they buy and through pressing for change by supporting one of the many groups already doing just that. At the practical level, we also hope that before long, certified pasture-fed meat will be available at the catering outlets in Friends House.

John Meadley and John Turner
Conference co-clerks