

Focus on Farming – Report on the Discussion held at the Devon Churches Rural Forum Meeting January 15th 2018

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1 Summary

This discussion does not represent an exhaustive overview of farming in Devon today, but covers some of the concerns and policy issues raised by members. For further information on any topic, or a wider overview, the organisations referenced by members will be helpful. Links to these have been collated on our DCRF website [here](#)

Pastoral Concerns - Mental health issues, including depression and suicide, continue to affect farming families. Factors affecting farmers include:

- Loneliness and isolation, exacerbated by the loss of livestock markets as natural meeting places
- Continuing suffering of animals and farmers through TB
- Financial concerns
- Succession planning
- The increasing vegan movement

Some aspects of farm economics were discussed including:

- Specialist markets - some farmers have managed to move from selling at a loss to profit through moving into specialist markets, however whilst this is helpful for some, the challenge of viable mass food production remains.
- Global commodity price fluctuations, quite outside an individual's control, can sometimes have a greater influence on profitability than issues either under the farmer's control, or influences from national government policy.
- Farm workers as well as farmers themselves need to be considered. So many farmers are now working solo that the number of jobs available for farm workers has decreased considerably, reducing locally available work, a factor in rural sustainability.
- The costs of regulation can be high, both in the direct cost of systems and processes and time required for "paperwork".
- Brexit continues to be a cause of great uncertainty for farmers, and uncertainty for any business is difficult.

Four wider areas affecting the farming environment were discussed:

- **Post Brexit Farm Subsidies** - Public Money for Public Good. The Environment Secretary, Michael Gove has said that the CAP is flawed and that public money should be spent on public goods – for example increasing access to land, environmental actions etc. – however, we might ask “if producing food is not a public good then what is?!” Links to recent speeches and policy announcements are available [here](#).
- **Soil Matters** - soil erosion is one of the biggest issues facing the world. It has been widely reported that at the current rate of erosion the world has only 60 harvest left (from 2015) and no soil = no food. The “headwaters of the Exe” land management project was discussed as an example of what can be done. Again, further information and links are available [here](#).
- **Natural Capital** – Natural capital can be defined as the world’s stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. The concern is that in using up these resources faster than they can be replenished we build up social, ecological and financial liabilities resulting in food poverty, reducing sustainability for communities, population displacement and more. The work of Dieter Helm of Oxford University on “Natural Capital” underpins much government thinking. Further information available [here](#).
- **Food Poverty and Strategy** - Food Poverty – while farmers are unable to make a **profit and producers are moving to niche markets, many people do not have access** to good quality local food. Devon has a [Food Strategy](#) and we have an opportunity to feed into this via Martyn Goss.

Church Responses and Discussion

- John Wibberley spoke about a Christian approach to food and farming being to look at profit as a by-product of doing the right thing – such as caring for the soil. Right values lead to right vision – and without vision the people perish (Proverbs 29.18). From vision can develop new sustainable ventures.
- The church and the diocese of Exeter own a significant amount of farmland. Could we be thinking about how this land is to be used in terms of sustainable planting, planting forest, access to the countryside, helping people to reconnect to creation and impacting mental health?
- In terms of direct pastoral care, the FCN is always willing to support church based pastoral care groups to understand the needs of farming families, and to train people to become FCN volunteers themselves. We need to remember that many issues that concern farming families will be extremely confidential and sensitive and that specialist pastoral care may often be needed, often provided by someone who is not a near neighbour. The FCN also facilitates suicide prevention training for rural groups.

- Opportunities for farmers to meet naturally have decreased with the loss of several livestock markets. The churches have in the past facilitated setting up “farm groups”. What can be done to support meeting opportunities today?
- A wider, supportive framework is very valuable – with listening and getting to know first-hand the concerns of our farming community concerns a priority. Through listening various exciting initiatives can emerge through churches, communities and farming networks working together.
- There are various community food networks connecting suppliers, farmers and consumers including people living in food poverty. It would be helpful to collate information on the different networks in order to contribute to the overall food strategy for Devon. Further information on food, food networks and food poverty on the Diocese of Exeter Faith in Action website
- We spoke about possible things the DCRF itself could facilitate in support of our farming community, for example:
 - Farm visits for clergy and encouraging church pastoral care teams to receive specialist training from the FCN in pastoral care for their farming community.
 - Additional resourcing for harvest and other farming festivals.
 - Exploring the idea of a “Devon Farming Business Strategy” bringing together people and organisations to look at the whole food and farming landscape including natural capital, food and farming product marketing.

We agreed to reflect on the write up from this meeting as to what this forum might be able to do – both personally – as individuals and churches – and at a more strategic level to take some of these issues forward and discuss at the next DCRF meeting in May.

2 Pastoral Concerns

Mental Health

Mental health issues, including depression and suicide continue to affect farming families.

Talking about mental health and raising awareness of suicide and suicide prevention work is helping - the stiff upper lip is beginning to lessen but farmers still need much support.

Factors impacting farmers include:

Loneliness and Isolation

Loneliness continues to be an issue with more and more farmers working alone on the farm.

Social media can help in reducing loneliness when people are not able to meet in person – but having opportunities to meet and talk in person and groups is still vital.

Loss of Livestock Markets

Livestock Markets are a major point of contact for many farmers but many have already closed or are closing. When Newton Abbott market closed there was a great deal of sadness with people saying goodbye to each other. Even though they lived reasonably close to each other the market was the place where they met. This aspect of market life is not always considered by policy makers when deciding which markets should close. For farmers, particularly retired groups of farmers, alternatives such as modern coffee shops, or even activities within community centres, are unlikely to attract the same people – there is therefore a need to develop appropriate ways of meeting for farmers – both working and retired – to come together in a natural way.

Bovine TB

TB continues to decimate herds in parts of Devon, and for those affected the stress of waiting for results, movement restrictions, resultant problems with cash flow and the loss of so many animals can be very severe.

Financial Concerns

Milk has recently increased to £1.10 as the most common price point for 4 pints of milk sold in the main supermarkets – the retail price is edging up – but the challenge is that shops continue to use milk as a loss leader. Recent news from the milk processors is not encouraging with rumours of a price drop. This affects the price of dairy cows very quickly. The cost of production is still higher in some cases than the price achieved by the farmers.

Hill farmers are barely making a living even with the basic farm payment. The Joseph Rowntree foundation suggests that 1 in 4 hill farmers are living below the poverty line. Farms need to be profitable – yet around 50% of income comes from the Basic Farm Payment for hill farmers.

In Devon a large percentage of farmers who receive the BFP wouldn't manage financially without it. However, a significant number of farmers would prefer to see them go, replaced with retailers paying a fairer price for produce. There is a need for balanced information to be available to the consumer.

Succession Planning

Issues of farming succession are difficult – splitting up farms between children. Small farms with low outgoings can be profitable for one person, but where there is a bigger family the farm is often split up to share between the next generation – and this can be like starting a new business from the beginning.

There may also be different views on how the farm should be run within the family, and this can cause tension. There can also be considerable generational pressure on the next

generation of farmers, particularly when difficult decisions need to be made such as culling the herd, or dealing with a financial problem.

Vegan Movement

For some farmers the increasing voice of the vegan movement is of concern. This [BBC article](#) reports from the Welsh Dairy Show in October 2017 about the need for farmers to be able to “prove they can produce food in a healthy manner” and in some parts of the country there have been reports of protests and online campaigns – this article from [Farmers Weekly](#) gives one example. An internet search shows many radio and TV programmes are tackling the subject from both farming and vegan perspectives – unfortunately they have time limited availability via i-player – so keep tuned to Countryfile and Farming Today for more information!

3 General Farm Economics

Specialist Markets

Some farmers have managed to move from selling at a loss to profit through moving into niche markets – such as rearing only grass fed animals, producing meat from rare breeds or farming organically. However, niche markets are helpful for some farmers but the challenge is also to feed everyone.

Specialist farming can produce excellent food products but has lower outputs and we still need to produce sufficient food for everyone to eat. The questions of how much of the food we eat in the UK we want to be produced in the UK, and the price consumers are prepared to pay for it, are crucial ones, with impacts on employment, land use and cultivation intensity, food miles, food security and household economics.

Global Price influences

In terms of farm gate prices, we need to be aware of what we can and cannot influence locally or even nationally. For example, a 2% change in the global grain price can wipe out a UK farmer’s annual profit for a whole year.

Farm Workers

Adrian Brooks spoke about the need to consider farm workers as well as farmers themselves. So many farmers are now working solo that the number of jobs available for farm workers has decreased considerably. Families who may have been in farm work for generations, including the tied housing that went with the work, are no longer able to work in their communities in this way. It is often said that British workers will not do the work that seasonal workers from the EU and other countries will do – but the issue is more about the level of wages paid. Having said this, many farmers pay their workers more than they actually receive themselves in farm income.

Costs of Regulation

The costs of regulation can be high, both in the direct cost of systems and processes and time required for “paperwork”. Some would say that the invention that has changed farming life over the past hundred years most is the mobile phone not least because a farmer can now speak to the RPA or DEFRA from the field. Around a day a week can be spent engaging with some form of regulatory work – which many farmers were not trained for. Most farmers want the freedom to farm without too much regulation, which was a significant factor in the decision on how to vote in the EU Referendum.

Brexit

Brexit continues to be a cause of great uncertainty for farmers, and uncertainty for any business is difficult. There are pros and cons for farmers, and the farming community was split in the June 2016 referendum. There is much hope in exporting to new markets but the EU remains a hugely important market for our produce.

4 The Farming Environment

Post Brexit Farm Subsidies - Public Money for Public Good

The Environment Secretary, Michael Gove has said that the CAP is flawed and that public money should be spent on public goods – for example increasing access to land, environmental actions etc. – however, we might ask “if producing food is not a public good then what is?!”

Recent speeches and policy announcements can be accessed via these [links](#)

Forum members commented that policy makers and politicians need to encourage farmers when good things are done and that more than computers will be needed to work out what should be compensated for “public good” in the new compensation scheme. It will need people on the ground. Hill farmers and organisations such as the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (South West) ([FWAG](#)) could help with this. How best practice will be rewarded is still to be worked out – but it is good that there is a vision to do this.

Environmental issues are at the forefront of much thinking and are part of young people’s lives. The new 25 year Environment Plan can be accessed [here](#).

Soil Matters

Soil erosion is one of the biggest issues facing the world. 90% of our food comes from the soil and one teaspoon of soil contains more living organisms than all the people on earth. It is also a major carbon sink, yet it is being eroded alarmingly by rain.

It has been widely reported that at the current rate of erosion the world has only 60 harvest left (from 2015) and no soil = no food.

For more information please see 2015 International Year of Soils conference [here](#)

George Euctice, Minister of State at Defra, and MP for Cambourne and Redruth, has said that soil health must sit at the centre of future Agriculture Policy – you can read more on this [here](#)

Martyn reported that three hundred thousand tonnes of soil is washed down the river Exe in one year. Further information can be found on the [West Country Rivers website](#)

The [headwaters of the Exe project](#) is looking at land management on pilot farms – tracing what happens to soil and other indicators on river impacts. The project is partly trying to put a monetary value on this work for the landowners which will contribute to developing a scheme whereby land management can be compensated.

Natural Capital

The work of [Dieter Helm of Oxford University](#) on “Natural Capital” underpins much government thinking. We have all the resources of soil and water etc. and we need to maintain these. It is the case that most farmers want to leave the land in better heart than they found it, yet it is said that 60% of the land is degraded.

The following is an excerpt from the [Natural Capital Forum](#) website:

Natural capital can be defined as the world’s stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. It is from this natural capital that humans derive a wide range of services, often called ecosystem services, which make human life possible.

The most obvious ecosystem services include the food we eat, the water we drink and the plant materials we use for fuel, building materials and medicines. There are also many less visible ecosystem services such as the climate regulation and natural flood defences provided by forests, the billions of tonnes of carbon stored by peatlands, or the pollination of crops by insects. Even less visible are cultural ecosystem services such as the inspiration we take from wildlife and the natural environment

With financial capital, when we spend too much we run up debt, which if left unchecked can eventually result in bankruptcy. With natural capital, when we draw down too much stock from our natural environment we also run up a debt which needs to be paid back, for example by replanting clear-cut forests, or allowing aquifers to replenish themselves after we have abstracted water. If we keep drawing down stocks of natural capital without allowing or encouraging nature to recover, we run the risk of local, regional or even global ecosystem collapse.

Poorly managed natural capital therefore becomes not only an ecological liability, but a social and economic liability too. Working against nature by overexploiting natural capital can be catastrophic not just in terms of biodiversity loss, but also catastrophic for humans as ecosystem productivity and resilience decline over time and some regions become more prone to extreme events such as floods and droughts. Ultimately, this makes it more difficult

for human communities to sustain themselves, particularly in already stressed ecosystems, potentially leading to starvation, conflict over resource scarcity and displacement of populations.

Food Poverty and Strategy

Food Poverty – while farmers are unable to make a profit and producers are moving to niche markets, many people do not have access to good quality local food. Devon has a [Food Strategy](#) and we have an opportunity to feed into this via Martyn Goss.

5 Church Responses and Discussion

Christian approaches to farming

John Wibberley's seven points (below) summarise a Christian response to agricultural policy making:

1. Farming needs profitability to survive & reinvest
2. Profit is the by-product of 'doing the right thing'
3. 'The right thing' is based on Christian **Values**
4. Right Values beget right **Vision**
5. Right Vision leads to sustainable **Ventures**
6. Ventures must respect Ecosystem Security
7. 'Natural Capital' maintenance is for 'public good'

A Christian approach is to look at profit as a by-product of doing the right thing – such as caring for the soil. Right values lead to right vision – and without vision the people perish (Proverbs 29.18). From vision can develop new sustainable ventures. There is a huge lot going on in farms in Devon and we need to balance fears and sad stories with the good news stories.

New farming ventures must respect the eco-system, security and sustainability. Worldwide geo-political security is also an issue as the ability to remain farming where you are depends on peace. We need also to look beyond questions of food security to world issues.

You can read more from John [here](#) in a chapter he contributed to in a book on Agriculture and Environmental vision and on a Brexit vision to 2040.

Use of Diocesan farmland

The church and the diocese of Exeter own a significant amount of farmland. Could we be thinking about how this land is to be used in terms of sustainable planting, planting forest, access to the countryside, helping people to reconnect to creation and impacting mental health?

North Devon Biosphere is working on greater access to the countryside and land use across the biosphere area. Are there ways we can relate to this?

Food Networks

At a local level the ideal is to produce and consume food locally. There are various community food networks connecting suppliers, farmers and consumers including people living in food poverty. It would be helpful to collate information on the different networks in order to contribute to the overall food strategy for Devon.

There is further information on food, food networks and food poverty on the Diocese of Exeter [Faith in Action website](#)

Pastoral Care and Listening

Some years ago the churches were instrumental in setting up “farm support groups” bringing people together at a local level. A number of these groups do still exist, but there is probably room to explore this approach afresh.

Pastoral Care for our farmers is vital but also needs to be highly sensitive given the nature of some of the issues that cause the concerns – many will be highly confidential and farming families may understandably be reluctant to share such difficulties with close neighbours in the community. The Farming Community Network, and the work of rural support workers, is particularly important in Devon. The FCN in particular is always willing to train volunteers from churches in church based pastoral care for farmers, and to train individuals as FCN volunteers who can support over a wider area. Please see "The Church's Response" section at the end of these notes for further ways our churches can support our farming community.

Heather Sayle spoke about the Bishops in Mission visit from Bishop Sarah where a meeting organised by local farmers to meet her has had some helpful knock on effects. Some young farmers have started selling at local markets in the villages and others have begun to market their produce more locally. The farmers who met felt very much listened to – providing a helpful model for the church to help – through listening first. The following harvest festival felt as if it had been reclaimed by the farming community. Andy said that sometimes harvest festivals can be so focused on the rest of the world that local farmers may not feel part of it.

Andy spoke about how the interaction of farmers with their vicar is very different when they meet in the livestock market than in the church. At the market the clergy person is meeting the farmer in his workplace – on his or her own territory – and this changes the conversational dynamic considerably.

Bi-vocational work for clergy is also helpful – for example Susanna Metz, Rural Dean of Torrington, is also a relief milker – many people she meets ask her “is she is still milking?” rather than is she still a vicar! again changing the conversational dynamic. Clergy could be encouraged to spend time with the main industry in their parishes – whether that be farming or something else.

Responses from DCRF

Are there things that this group in particular could facilitate in support of our farming community?

For example:

- Farm visits for clergy and encourage more church pastoral care teams to receive specialist training from the FCN in pastoral care for their farming community.
- As mentioned above, farming festivals can be a very important way of developing understanding, bringing the whole community together, celebrating good news, praying for troubled areas, focusing on farming as still a central underpinning of rural life. Can we better resource our churches for these services?
- A Devon Farming Business Strategy – is this something this group could facilitate? Bringing together people and organisations to look at the whole food and farming landscape including natural capital, food and farming product marketing.

We agreed to reflect on the write up from this meeting as to what this forum might be able to do – both personally – as individuals and churches – and at a more strategic level to take some of these issues forward and discuss at the next DCRF meeting in May.

P J Dobbin
Secretary DCRF
April 2018