



ACF Update: Autumn 2019

EDITORIAL: Christopher Jones

Many of you will recall our last conference two years ago 'A Hope and a Future for Farming': about the nature and basis of Christian hope. Is it a denial of reality or a motivation to act? This November we are going to explore some practical farming out-workings of that hope. At the same time we realize that political events or the actions of powerful corporations could snuff out some of these. As Adrian says in his account of his latest spell in Ethiopia the space for the out-working of hope needs protecting, just as Nehemiah's developing wall needed protecting.

This links with what ACF has been saying about some of the problems and possibilities of Brexit, now, however we find ourselves finding dangers wider than farming alone: possibilities we never dreamed of looming in Britain. Perhaps we might imagine what the farmer prophets Amos and Micah might say about a situation where a leader stands accused of lying, appears ready to circumvent or break the law and 'disagrees' with the highest court in the land whilst abuse and threat become commonplace. We need to pray and avoid getting caught up in all of this. In the past there has been much Christian input into the conventions and systems of our Government and Justice and we need to be true to this.

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ACF Conference 2019: Hope in Practice – Enduring Faith through Adversity.

Date: Thursday 14th November 2019

Venue: Market Harborough Methodist Church, Leicestershire.

Further details on page 8

We have heard recently from Johnny, a member of ACF who had had quite a faith journey over the last couple of years

From step to difficult step in Hope

*“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

Isaiah 58 vs 6-8



It's 1st April and there's snow on the ground as I look across the Eden Valley toward the Pennines. With my wife, Beth, and our two-year-old daughter, I'm taking break with friends in Cumbria after what's been quite a year.

A year ago we were watching avalanches fall from the 13,000' peaks opposite our house in the mountains of Tajikistan. We'd lived there for four years, working with Operation Mercy. Beth, a physio, worked on a health project that trained nurses in community health, while I supported the construction of high-altitude greenhouses and improvement of orchards in the lower valleys. I was also the Regional Director. I was however not feeling well that April day and little did I

know that two months later I'd be back in the UK starting chemo-therapy for Hodgkin Lymphoma (a blood cancer). Our lives in Tajikistan were torn from us.

My interest in Isaiah 58 however goes back further. As a teenager I knew Jesus and I've had a faith as long as I could remember. However I'd not really given it much thought in relation to it shaping my life and career. One day a missionary from Burundi spoke at our youth group and challenged us: "why simply settle for the safety of existence when you can experience the adventure of living". He went on to suggest that 'by throwing our lot in with Jesus' that we would have real adventures. Around that same time I read Isaiah 58 and felt a calling to the hungry and broken.



I love farming so that farming seemed a logical place to start and after four years at Harper Adams, during which time I had a placement year helping farmers in the West Midlands access DEFRA diversification grants. I then went to Malawi with VSO and spent two years with farmers and villagers in a remote forest area to develop small businesses and promote agro-forestry. It was here, in the middle of nowhere that I had my first exposure to the difficulties that some people face and also that development can't immediately address all the world's problems. I also contracted dengue fever and was made aware of the fear that must grip parents living in areas of the world with limited or no access to medical facilities.

Returning to the UK, I worked with The Salvation Army, providing training and support to colleagues in Asia. It was an exciting time and a privilege to work alongside people who loved the Lord and had given up much to share His love with their poor communities. I also came to realise how local churches can help transform communities. And then to Tajikistan: demonstrating Jesus' love through projects in a remote place.

But back to Cumbria. I reflected again on these now familiar verses. I can't share my bread with the hungry but I can fast and pray and we look forward to what will happen next. I'm blessed too that I've been cancer free for the last two scans. The Lord is my rear-guard and has protected us, as a family. He continues to walk with us every step of the journey!

Writing this article from Hampshire five months later my health continues to improve and we are prayerfully considering our next steps. I am exploring jobs within rural community development in the UK (and also starting a small log business) and Beth is starting a social enterprise to support pregnant women and new mums. We are not sure what the next steps on this adventure will be but are sure that it will as exciting and challenging as the journey so far and, best of all, He will be with us every step of the way! To find out more about the projects go to: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/pamirprojects/>
Or bit.ly/pamirs-giving

Johnny Hibbert-Hingston

Adrian in Ethiopia

'By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take for forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen'. From Nehemiah 9.

I've been working in Ethiopia for the last three months and recently have been reading Nehemiah. Although his task to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem was significantly more important than mine – drafting a drought resilience strategy for smallholder farmers and pastoralists in the drylands of Ethiopia – I've drawn encouragement from the readings. While it is too early to tell if the strategy will be endorsed, I'm hoping that it will lead to a pilot project that will be implemented in 12 northern zones that are home to around 20 million people, and result in increased investment in watershed management, small-scale irrigation, reforestation, nutrition, health, education and reproductive health. My work was commissioned by Government and funded by the UN. The strategy will inevitably require up-dating, but will guide UN investment in northern Ethiopia for the next decade.



Our day-to-day work seldom ranks alongside Nehemiah's, but nonetheless we can find work both challenging and demanding. Certainly this assignment has been for me challenging and demanding as I've tried to listen to and balance the interests and priorities of different stakeholders: Government; Ethiopia's international development partners, who collectively provide a third of the national budget and who therefore have real influence; and those typically 'lost' voices of Ethiopia's poorest farmers – in particular women. They lack even oxen to cultivate their land and who sow, weed and harvest each year by hand. Nehemiah would have felt quite at home in the highlands of Ethiopia.

Resilience is a relatively recent development buzzword and yet already it appears to have almost as many definitions as the 200 humanitarian-development organisations that work here. While therefore it's easy to be cynical about today's 'development industry', it's worthwhile reminding ourselves that Nehemiah also faced sceptics and worse. Reading Nehemiah has been an inspiration as I've 'laid one paragraph on another'.

The vision statement I've crafted reads: *in five years' time, Government and development partners will provide adequate assistance to meet the basic needs of food insecure smallholder farming families* – in a pilot area that is home to around 20 million people – *to facilitate the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance*. In brief, the vision is that poor farmers are assisted through targeted investment to overcome the underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability and are not just palmed off with ad-hoc and short-term emergency assistance that feeds people for today, but not tomorrow.

While as ACF members we labour in very different areas of work, I'd like to think Nehemiah could relate to the work we attempt and that we can also recognise that much of what we do is only possible because of God's presence which sustains us.

Adrian Cullis

Wendell Berry's Right Kind of Farming

We have begun to wake up to the possible implications of a Trade Deal with the United States. The media are starting to get hold of half of the story. The other half is that it is not the standards and practices of US family farmers which are the threat, it is the power and practices of corporations. The US farmer / poet, Wendell Berry reflects on farming issues.



Excerpts from an interview by Gracy Olmstead with Wendell Berry, farmer, essay writer and poet.

Wendell Berry has long argued that today's agricultural practices are detrimental to ecology, community and local economies. A native Kentuckian, Mr. Berry has written over 40 works of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. For his work, he has been awarded: a Guggenheim fellowship, the National Humanities Medal and the Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award.

Mr. Berry argues that healthy forms of agriculture require intentional cultivation on the part of both consumers and farmers. Americans presume there will always be enough — money, clean soil, healthy water — to fulfil our desires, but our ravenous economics goes against the very nature of our world and its finite resources. Advocates for sustainable agriculture argue that we ought to recognize the limits of our world and, as Mr. Berry writes, "live in it on *its* terms, not ours."

How do we get politicians to support more sustainable forms of agriculture? Mr Berry suggests that: the problem is not so much that of the limitations of planning but rather ecological and agricultural ignorance and a sort of moral blindness. The problems we ought to be dealing with are not problems because they are going to cause us trouble in the future, but they are causing trouble right now.

Unfortunately, when politicians and journalists want to know farming, they seldom visit “rural America” to observe first-hand the fields and waterways or to talk to farmers, ex-farmers, ex-merchants of the small towns, or to talk to mayors and county judges. Instead, they will more likely talk to an academic or bureaucrat, bound within the industrial structure of agriculture, agri-science and agribusiness.

The real problems of farming are: soil erosion, soil degradation, pollution of waterways by sediment and toxic chemicals, ecological damage, elimination of small farms, destruction of the cultures of husbandry and the ruin of rural towns and communities. We might also add, the curse of overproduction, which at present, as often before, is the major and the cruelest problem.

These problems can be summed up as the triumph of industrialism over the lives of living creatures, and over the life of the living world. As industrialism does not require limits of any kind, rather it's premise is for limitless economic growth, consumption and by implication limitless waste, and finally exhaustion.

A farm bill that seeks to help rural communities might include production controls and price support. However the dairy “industry” is increasing milk production by millions of gallons every year, which reduces prices and drives small dairies out of business. The bill therefore serves the interests of large dairies. Written differently, a bill might prevent large retail stores from deliberately underpricing their goods in order to destroy locally-owned family businesses. I don't see why the government should not enforce honest prices in the same way it enforces honest weights and measures. For these reasons, I entirely distrust the terms “free market” and “level playing field.” These phrases are intoned as if they were the names of gods, but how exactly are small farmers served by the free market and the level playing field? The problem that has impoverished and destroyed family farms is almost always low prices resulting from surplus production. This is however also a land-destroying problem. The only solution to this is a combination of production control and price supports.

An Iowa farmer recently commented that industrial agriculture is inevitable — the natural fruit of technological progress and globalization. This farmer reminds me of others I have talked to who, when asked about farming that is increasingly industrialized and isolating, replied by saying “We must feed the world.” Wendell Berry's response to this is that “If you can persuade farmers that their hardships are ‘inevitable,’ then you have got them trapped where they can be forgotten by their political representatives and exploited by agribusiness corporations. If “technological progress” is the same as technological determinism, then there are no remedies. It is however known that technological progress is the result of choices made from the inventor and manufacturer to the people who buy and use them. The important questions are to do with standards by which choices are made - made using different standards, choices would be different. And as we know, our Iowa farmer is not making choices according to a key standard: the ecological health of the farm and economic health of the farmer.

The problem of feeding the world should not be addressed by production but by waste: farmland, topsoil and food. Perhaps somebody has already done this as it's the place to start. The people, fairly numerous and highly credentialed, who argue only industrial agriculture can feed the world are in effect arguing that we can only feed the world by a farming system that destroys both the farm and farmer. There will come a point, when this kind of agriculture will no longer be able to feed anybody.

Gracy asked about the difficulty of attracting or keeping young people in farming: for some because of the cost of procuring land and starting a farm. Wendell Berry replied that farmers I know have told me that they were discouraged from going into farming by high school counsellors and mentors, because they are 'too smart'. Such advice aligns with a larger cultural prejudice against manual labour. Farming is all too often associated with "drudgery" while ex-farmers talk of being "liberated" from their hard and depressing lives. Because of such prejudice, and also economic adversity, farmers encourage their children to leave farming. These youngsters who leave farming are an invaluable cultural and economic resource to be valued. What can we do about this? I think working locally on our own farms to address problems, make improvements and kindle a "passion for the right kind of farming": better husbandry and more traditional agrarian values. These things we must keep alive, not because of their "potential value" but because they are right for now.

You can see more about Wendell Berry and his writings on his Wikipedia Page:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendell_Berry

THE RISE AND FALL OF A WHEAT GRAIN

The rise and fall of a wheat grain is also a parallel story to the trials, tragedies – and triumphs of our own human lives. The seed "rises" from the ground, grows, matures, and finally "falls" into the throat of a combine harvester. With any crop, there is germination and emergence ("the birth to toddler stage"), growth and pollination ("adolescence and marriage") and maturity, in readiness for harvest ("the rest of our lives"). This last stage in our lives is the preparing of ourselves for that ultimate "harvest of souls" which will happen to all of us on a day which only God knows.



So, what is required to produce a "hundredfold" crop of wheat, as in the Parable of the Sower? (*Mark 4:1-20*). The amazing thing is that modern agricultural technology has not, and will not, displace any of the principles illustrated in this parable.

First, the seed must be sown into a carefully prepared seedbed. In the Parable, a lot of attention is given to the quality of the soil. Is it rocky, or stony, or cloddy? Is it full of weeds and rubbish? Or is it a friable, moist and deep soil?

When the farmer sows the seed into a good seedbed, it has the best conditions for germination and establishment. In the early stages, there is a "war" between the farmer's skills and the onslaught of pests, diseases, weeds, drought, frost and flood – a fight that continues throughout the life of the crop, as an old saying goes:

*One for the slug, one for the crow,
One to die, and one to grow.*

The growing plant is prey to pests like wheat bulb fly and slugs, and diseases like rust and mildew. It can also be choked out by pernicious weeds like blackgrass and wild oats. It needs protection and nurture. With good husbandry and care, the wheat's full yield potential can be realised. It is during the lengthening days that the ears and grains are now being formed. If a crop is stunted at this stage, it will not produce a good yield. It will be a "thirtyfold" crop instead of a "hundredfold" crop.

The wheat then produces ears and the delicate flowers typical of grasses, which need fertilisation: another risky part of its life. Warm, breezy weather is ideal. Wet, cold weather is not! All the grains have to grow in the ears to produce the best crop. Sunlight fills and rain swells the grain. At maturity, the crop changes from green to golden yellow ready for harvest, it is, in fact, dying. When the combine goes into the field, the crop is already dead.

What does the combine do? It, literally, knocks hell out of the crop! It beats the grain out of the chaff, collects the grain into its tank and blows the chaff away, which, together with the straw, is thrown out of the back of the combine onto the ground. It is a separation, a “judgement”. The dead chaff and straw will stay dead, but the grain, while “dead”, has the potential for rebirth, revival, resurrection. (*John 12:24*)

The harvested grain will be made into bread to provide us with the sustenance we need, but some of the best seed will be kept for sowing for next year, to be “resurrected” and multiplied a “hundredfold”.

Throughout all this, the farmer's skill as a husbandman in partnership with God's provision of sunlight, warmth and rain work hand in hand to produce the best crop. In other words, it is teamwork with God and the farmer working in harmony to produce a “hundredfold” crop!

As good soil and good husbandry produce the best wheat crop, a loving, caring and supportive upbringing for a child will give him/her the best foundation for life. But there are challenges: remember “the terrible two’s!” Later on, during the teenage phase, temptations are strong. The world, the flesh and the devil have their own vivid appeal, and a rapidly changing body is prone to pimples and other embarrassing afflictions. It is a time of struggle and doubt - yet it is a time of tremendous potential.

From infancy to adulthood, children need guidance, help, support and encouragement as they begin to fully realise their potential. It is also a time to share the person of Jesus Christ to them in a way that is relevant to their situation and their future: to present the positive and eternal advantages of a life in harmony with God.

As adults, the awareness of God's presence, guidance from the Bible - the “Handbook of Life” - and communication with Him in prayer, are essential to a purposeful, joyful and satisfying life. Don’t miss any bits out - or life will be less good. In the same way, God's provision of light, warmth, and rain work is essential to produce the best crop. If any one of these elements is missing, the crop would fail.

Farming has changed from horses to tractors, but we now have even greater changes: computerised soil mapping, crop monitoring using drones, and GPS steered tractors. But is our Christian witness and church culture appropriate to a 21st century lifestyle, or is it seriously out of touch? What it should not do is forget that modern technology and culture will not displace any of the ageless life principles prescribed in the Bible.

Every year, the cycle of seedtime and harvest is a reminder of how light, warmth and rain is a picture of the Trinity of Father (“light”), Son (“warmth”) and Holy Spirit (“live-giving rain”). If there is no light, warmth, or rain, there is no harvest and we will go hungry.

In the successful growing of a wheat crop, God’s ability and the farmer’s responsibility go hand in hand. This is exactly the same principle for a successful Christian life: our responsibility to God’s ability. And God will not fail us, as He has promised:-

“As long as earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease”
(*Gen 8:22*)

Malcolm Harrison

Hope in Practice – Enduring Faith through Adversity

Date: **Thursday 14th November 2019**

Timings: 9:45am (ACF Annual General Meeting), 10:30am (ACF Conference) – 4:15pm (depart)

Venue: **Market Harborough Methodist Church**, Northampton Road, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9HE.

Cost: Conference fees – for members £25, non-members £30, card carrying students £12. Any non-members joining on the day will enjoy a £5 discount to their annual subscription.

Lunch will be provided

How to book:

- Via our website: acfhub.com
- Through Eventbrite – [Link to Eventbrite](#)
- by telephone to the ACF Office: 01788 510800
- By email to cj@agriculturalchristianfellowship.org.uk payment by BACS or cheque sent to ACF Office Manor Farm, Guilsborough Road, West Haddon, Northamptonshire, NN6 7AQ

Conference Content:

In our last conference we explored the basis of Christian Hope. This time we want to begin by recalling that discussion and then go on to look at hopeful, practical farming examples in the lives of some of our members. We will be looking at the opportunities and challenges for Christian farmers within the context of food from a healthy planet produced by healthy people. There is much talk of the need for resilience amongst farmers but resilience to what? Government policy, agri-business, financial pressures, recession, changing diets, international trade, climate change or ageing; or all of these? We will go on to explore the problems of protecting space in which to farm sustainably and hopefully.

We have an opportunity to share in running a session in the Oxford Real Farming Conference at the beginning of January 2020 and we hope our own conference will provide inspiration for this.

Speakers to include

- **The Rev'd Dr Mark Betson**, the Church of England Rural Officer and member of the Arthur Rank Centre Team
- **Charles Smith**, the retiring Chief Executive of the Farming Community Network
- **John Plumb** ACF Chairman
- **Adrian Cullis** ACF Co-coordinator
- We are in discussion with other people.