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The Canadian Foodgrains Bank: A Distinctly Canadian Response to Global Food Insecurity

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As Presbyterian World Service and Development celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, Presbyterian History uses this issue to tell one part of the PWS&D story.

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank story is a multi-layered one requiring that it be viewed from a variety of angles to draw out the nuances and complexities present. On one level it is the age-old agricultural story of farmers getting food to people who are hungry. However, there is an international development angle to the story. This is also a story about challenging government regulators who controlled food distribution. This is an ecumenical story about a diverse group of Christian churches, who are often critical of one another, finding a way to work together for the common good of humanity. This is a story of rural people educating urbanites about the challenges of farming and the power of agri-business. This is a story Canadian farming practice being changed as a result of engagement with rural people in the global south. Each of those stories raises its own set of questions, seeking to knit them together is a challenge that this article can only begin to address. As an historian I will default to telling a story, when all else fails.

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank (hereafter CFGB) delivered \$42.1 million to projects involving 865,731 beneficiaries in 34 countries in the 2019-2020 fiscal year. A key source of funds for the Foodgrains Bank are donations from individual farmers/producers and from more than 200

community growing projects in rural communities across Canada (those donations are matched by Global Affairs Canada through the Government of Canada's various international relief and development programs.) Many of the contexts receiving support from the CFGB are rural communities.

The CFGB arose out of a desire among Western Canadian farmers in the late 1970's to respond to that decade's world food crisis. In so doing they challenged the consensus understanding of food aid policy. By applying an agrarian mindset to the food challenge, the farmers who drove the early years of the Foodgrains Bank created a space for farmers/producers to have a voice and place in Canada's response to the food security needs of the world. That outlier voice from the 1970's has now become a member of the Humanitarian Coalition, the first place the Government of Canada turns to respond to humanitarian crises in the world, a recognition that the CFGB is an important partner with the Government of Canada in this work.

In the process of building the CFGB, the communitarian ethos frequently evident as rural communities respond to need has brought together 15 churches and church agencies representing 30 denominations and 12,000 congregations. These represent 85% of the Christians in Canada. The theological breadth present in the CFGB is noteworthy, there is no other context in Canada where Christians of this theological diversity function

together. To find Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, United Church members, and Adventists (to name but five examples) working together bears witness to the communitarian ethos of rural communities building unexpected coalitions around specific matters of joint concern. The CFGB declares itself to be “A Christian Response to Hunger”.

The first donors, and still the backbone of the donations received by the CFGB, are individual farmers donating grains, corn, and pulses to the CFGB at grain elevators across Canada. Community growing projects have become a significant part of the public face of the CFGB, in 2019-2020 36% of donations came from community growing projects. Growing projects are contexts where urban Canadians donate funds to rent land and buy the inputs needed to grow a crop, while the farmers/producers plant the crop and tend it. At harvest time there is a celebration which includes an opportunity for farmers/producers to introduce urban Canadians to agrarian life. Consistently now over 200 community growing projects occur annually across Canada, taking place in every province except Newfoundland.

The CFGB is a producer/farmer driven, Canadian-based, Christian partnership that has helped to shape Canada’s conversation about and initiatives responding to food security matters related to international development and it has done that by staying true to its agrarian roots. The definition of agrarian be used is the one developed by Norman Wirzba, who grew up on a farm in Alberta and is now a professor at Duke Divinity School:

Agrarianism is not simply the concern or prerogative of a few remaining farmers, but is rather a comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the

health of both land and culture....[It] grows out of the sustained, practical, intimate engagement between the power and creativity of both nature and humans. In agrarian practices we see a deliberate way of life in which the integrity and wholeness of people and neighbourhoods, and the natural sources they depend upon, are maintained and celebrated.¹

The CFGB provides an example of how an agrarian vision can have global impact through careful attention to the local. The CFGB works at the community level, a central value of agrarian life.

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Even as an individual farmer makes a donation, their donation is deposited in a cooperative account in the food grains bank. The agrarian understanding of community working together towards a common goal, stands as a fundamental value in the CFGB. An agrarian understanding,

while recognizing the limitations of any human enterprise, has a hopeful worldview. The CFGB by offering local communities a way to respond to the world size challenges of food security empowers grassroots rural people.

Through exposure tours operated by the CFGB Canadian farmers and other rural people meet and engage with are farmers and rural people in aid-receiving contexts. In the process both sides discover a common set of concerns – dependence on nature, the pressures of the agri-food business seeking to shape agriculture, and a profound connection to a particular piece of geography. These common experiences and shared values build solidarity across the divisions of language and ethnicity. This connection provides a foundation of respect towards the farmers who are receiving support. As rural people themselves the board members of the CFGB are cognizant of the complex realities of rural independence and rural pride which also cut across language and

¹ Norman Wirzba, “introduction”, in Wirzba ed., *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture*,

Community and the Land, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), p. 5.

ethnicity. Further the ubiquitous skepticism which rural people hold towards outsiders who seek to tell rural people what to do, means the rural people and farmers present on the Board of the CFGB seek to do to others in need, as they would wish those offering help to them would do.

THE CFGB'S HISTORY

The food crisis of the early 1970's led to the World Food Conference in Nov. 1974. Present at that meeting with both government and non-government agencies were food producers and distributors. Among the ideas discussed was an international food bank that would have food available for distribution to places of need as food shortages occurred. That idea never got off the ground internationally, largely because the research done by food security researchers indicated that massive infusions of "free" food were ineffective in responding to food insecurity. Among the problems being a distortion of the existing food markets and the creation of aid dependence. Even though rejected by the World Food Conference as a way forward the idea was planted in the minds of a group of Canadian Mennonite farmers who were present at the gathering.²

In 1973, Art DeFehr a Mennonite furniture maker based in Winnipeg, travelled to Bangladesh with the Mennonite Central Committee to see the need and what MCC was doing in response. DeFehr returned to Winnipeg with a desire to cut through the layers of bureaucracy to allow Canadian farmers to donate a portion of their crop directly to help feed the hungry of the world. Canadian farmers had surplus crop in their barns and there were hungry people in many places in the world, surely there was a simple way to get the grain out of producers' barns and into hungry stomachs. DeFehr believed that Mennonite grain farmers on the Prairies could be mobilized to create their own food bank able to respond to the needs of the world, for many wheat farmers harvested more wheat than their quota allowed them to sell to the Canadian Wheat Board.

To that end he started conversations with friends who farmed and staff from the MCC. Building on the Biblical story of Joseph, in which surplus grain was stored up against the coming years of famine, the idea of a Food Bank was born. In 1976 after negotiations with the Canadian Wheat Board it became possible for farmers to designate at the grain elevator to which they were delivering their grain what portion of their delivery they were giving to the Foodgrains Bank account. However, the donation came out of the producer's quota. These donations directly impacted the farmer's bottom line.

The Mennonite Central Committee leadership was not pleased by the efforts of this grassroots movement. First, there was a fear that the Foodgrains Bank would take away from the work of MCC in doing economic development work. Second, as noted above direct food aid was regarded as problematic, creating more long-term problems than it solved in the short-term. But nonetheless the Foodgrains Bank was born and started its work.

Grassroots co-operative movements have long history among Canadian Prairie farmers. As Eva Fernandez notes in her examination of farmer co-operatives, the Wheat Pools on the Canadian Prairies are the only examples in the North American and Europe contexts of grain farmers working cooperatively. As she suggests co-operatives depend on trust to be effective. Such trust is often built around shared ethnic backgrounds, but here again the Wheat Pools go against the trends for they have from the start been ethnically diverse. The history of the Wheat Pools created a context in which the idea of a food bank would have been received with openness, rather than skepticism and distrust.³

The first donations of wheat were received by the MCC Food Bank board in Oct. 1976 and through the winter of 1976/77 the operational agreements with CIDA are developed making it possible for the FGB to access government funds. In fact, the FGB was among the first NGOs to receive CIDA support. Mark Charlton, writing in

² My uncle, C. Wilbert Loewen, was one of those present at that gathering.

³ Eva Fernandez, "Trust, religion, and cooperation in western agriculture, 1880-1930", *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (AUGUST 2014), pp. 678-698

his 1992 study, said of the FGB, “It gathers contributions from members, largely farmers who generally contribute food commodities rather than cash.”⁴ The relationship with the FGB became the model for CIDA to entrust more of the Canadian Government’s food aid budget to NGOs. In the 1980/1981 fiscal year 1.9% of the federal government’s food aid budget or \$3.5 million went to NGOs; five years later in 1985/1986 the figure had grown to 9.9% of the budget or \$34.4 million.⁵ The substantial growth in support for NGOs was largely because the work done by the FGB.

A CIDA sponsored study challenged some of the concerns about food aid. The study found that small NGO driven food aid projects were well supervised meaning there was less leakage of the aid to agents and to corruption. The projects’ limited size and targeting did not distort the existing food production markets. Therefore, the food got to where it was most

needed, and was frequently tied to development projects encouraging local food production.⁶

C. Wilbert Loewen joined the staff of the MCC Food Bank in the fall of 1978, becoming Executive Director in 1979, a role he would hold until 1990. Loewen, a self-described farmer who had also been an educator and congregational pastor, was an activist who dreamed large dreams. The next decade of the FGB history was shaped by his dreams.

Donations to the FGB remained slow through until Oct. 1980 when the Wheat Board adopted the first Alternative Grain Gathering pilot project which allowed farmers to donate grain outside of the quota system. Thus farmers were now able to give grain that they were unable to sell to the

Wheat Board, or to any buyer. Grain that previously had sat in their granaries. The Wheat Board did put the stipulation on this grain that it could not be sent as Aid to any country that was presently a market for Canadian grain. The Wheat Board was ensuring that the giving of Aid would not harm its grain markets. With this opening, the Wheat Board loosened its control over Canadian grain distribution fractionally. It was an opening that allowed for the growth of the FGB.

EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

In Nov. 1982, discussions began with ten other Christian denominations in Canada to move the MCC FGB to be an inter-denominational Christian response to hunger. The conversations raised questions for a number of the denominations, some of whom were involved in development work around the world. How would joining this initiative impact “the more progressive aid and devel-

This co-operative action allowed Christians from a wide theological and political spectrum to sit at the same table and work together. Here again an agrarian mindset of co-operation towards a common goal took precedence to the nuances of political and theological differences. The simple grass-roots desire to see hungry people fed, moved denominational leaders passed the standard lines of division to be drawn together

opment thinking” that many denominations had adopted? In using the global food grain system was not the FGB undermining the ability of churches to call for justice in that very system? And how would the need for sustainable agriculture be impacted by encouraging Canadian producers to grow a surplus that could be given away? These questions were raised by a variety of voices. However, these concerns were to be balanced by the speed with which the Food Bank was able to respond to disasters and other emergencies. The simple logic of “What I am doing now is good because I have lots of grain and I am able to help hungry individuals” was compelling. This was the attraction of the Foodgrains Bank, a

⁴ Mark Charlton, *The Making of Canadian Food Aid Policy*, (McGill-Queen’s UP, 1992), p. 46.

⁵ Ibid. p. 48

⁶ Ibid. p. 86

system that allowed for the delivery of food to people in need.⁷

In response to the larger philosophical questions, the MCC was insistent that the Food Bank was part of a larger, multi-faceted engagement with food security issues that involved development as a key factor. The MCC FGB believed:

the grain bank program will in a modest way demonstrate the existence of alternatives and contribute to the international debate on equitable food and agricultural policies. Credibility gained through well-planned and executed action, even on a modest scale, should develop expertise within the Canadian community which will reinforce those individuals and organizations who can help to influence the structure of world food policy....the grain distribution system should serve the needs of all people and that voluntary giving and religiously motivated efforts were needed in addition to the role of governments and commerce. With adequate supplies and distribution mechanisms, a grain bank could make possible a quick response at a time when human life depends on such response.”⁸

At a follow-up a meeting in April 1983, five denominations became the founding partners of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank Association. In January 1984, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada and the United Church of Canada joined the CFGB. The theological breadth present in those two additions is breath-taking.⁹ Murray Krug, a United Church participant, commented before the United Church joined “If we are to become partners it is unlikely that our understandings and priorities would be shared by most of the partners. However, the structures and partners are likely to be open and flexible enough that it should not be a problem.” The operating model of the CFGB, was that a farmer who was a United Church member would donate at their local grain elevator and that grain would be credited to the

United Church. If the United Church was operating a project in Eritrea, grain would be delivered by the CFGB in Eritrea to the United Church project. The CFGB was a bank accepting deposits and delivering withdrawals where requested. The CFGB was an umbrella organization working on collection, transportation, and delivery – the projects receiving the grain were operated by the partner denominations themselves.¹⁰

This co-operative action allowed Christians from a wide theological and political spectrum to sit at the same table and work together. Here again an agrarian mindset of co-operation towards a common goal took precedence to the nuances of political and theological differences. The simple grass-roots desire to see hungry people fed, moved denominational leaders passed the standard lines of division to be drawn together in a uniquely Canadian project. Here then was an initiative which in 2010 represented 85% of Christians in Canada. No other organization in the Canadian Christian community can claim that level of support. This is the old-style barn building, in which people of very different socio-economic and political commitments, come together in a rural community for a common purpose.

The rural world view remains present at the boardroom table of the CFGB as a significant portion of board members are active farmers from family farms. These are people who live in the tension between being on the one hand producers who provide inputs to the food industry and therefore are part of corporatized consumerism and on the other hand being people who live on and love the land and have concerns about its commodification. In this common connection the leadership of the CFGB recognize in each other fellow travellers committed to doing what farmers have always done – feed hungry people.

GROWING PROJECTS¹¹

The fall of 1981 saw the CFGB and many aid agencies turning their attention to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. At the same time Mennonite

⁷ PWS&D file 1992-1254-1-2 (Oct. 27, 1983)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Timeline, “20 Years in Review”, CFGB, 2003.

¹⁰ PWS&D file 1992-1254-1-2 (Oct. 27, 1983)

¹¹ The discussion that follows comes from the author’s experiences and conversations.

farmers in Ontario wanted to join with their colleagues on the Prairies to give food to a hungry world. These two factors opened the doors to new challenges and opportunities. Corn was now being donated, and it was a non-regulated commodity which brought its own challenges. While on the Prairies farmers had surplus grain sitting in their granaries “going to waste”, and the goal was to get that grain to hungry people. In Ontario, farmers had no limits on what they could sell, so there was no corn sitting in silos. The question was how could corn or pulses be “acquired”?

The 1980’s high interest rates had a devastating toll on family farmers across Canada (read all of North America). Many farmers were losing their farms, older farmers who were looking to retire were unable to do so because no one could afford to buy farms with the interest rates. The entire rural economy was in shambles, And still there were food security needs other places in the world but Canadian farmers were in trouble and had little to give.

A few Ontario farmers looking at all of this, saw an opportunity. They would invite urban congregations to donate cash to cover all the inputs and costs of putting in a crop and harvesting it. The crop would be donated to CFGB or the crop would be sold and the income/excess donations given to the CFGB.

This plan created three contact points between urban congregations and rural congregations. First, in the spring, farmers visited congregations and told the story which included outlining the cost of the inputs required to grow 50 acres of corn (as an example). For most urban congregations the costs and the inputs were eye opening. At times the costs included renting the land, for the land had a value as well. In these conversations, urban people were the learners and the rural people the experts. Sometimes urban congregations were invited to attend the seeding of the field, again the farmers were the experts managing sophisticated technology. These experiences left many urban congregation members with a newfound respect for the ability and knowledge of farmers/producers.

Second, a sign would be put up on the land indicating it was a CFGB growing project. The sponsoring congregations – both urban (the providers of money) and rural (the providers of expertise) were listed. Urbanites could drive out of the city to see their crop growing.

Third, when harvest came the rural congregations put on a celebration feast. While there was the work of the harvest to be done, the significant part of the celebrations were the informed conversations between participants, relationships were built and promises to do this again next year were made.

In 2020 there were 229 Community Growing projects across Canada, half of them in Ontario.

Over the years the urbanites involved in these projects have grown in their understanding and now engage in sophisticated conversations about crop rotation on the land, use of land friendly agricultural practices, and offer engaged reflections on the impact of agri-business. The farmers have also become more sophisticated in their farm practices, having engaged in strategic planning conversations to look at yield rates, environmentally friendly farming methods and the planting of alternative crops. These have become important places for rural-urban interaction.

CONCLUSION

The CFGB demonstrates the resilience of farmers and rural people to achieve a vision. Challenging the systems and the structures by simple perseverance the vision was achieved. A vision as simple as trying to help feed some of the hungry of the world. As agrarian people the projects are human sized, but through a series of human sized projects the world has been changed for the better. As agrarian people they have practiced the humility of flexibility and learning, while all the time remaining true to the core vision of feeding hungry people. For at the end of the day the CFGB is exactly what it advertises itself to be “A Christian Response to Hunger.”

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HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

The Rev. Dr. D. B. Lowry on behalf of the Clerks of Assembly: Principal Clerk, The Rev. Dr. D. C. MacDonald; Deputy Clerk, The Rev. Dr. E. H. Bean; and himself also a deputy clerk, read a Statement from the Clerks to the 1981 Assembly in the middle of a debate. The pastoral portion of the Clerks' statement was spread in the minutes, *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, pg. 113-114.

Moderator, The Clerks of Assembly have the special privilege of observing at close hand a succession of Assemblies. In any one Assembly, the frailty of our attempts to be the church are all too obvious. It doesn't take long for anyone to pick up the fact that our procedures and behaviour at Assembly are very, very human. So the welfare of the Church is entrusted to an earthen vessel. It is in watching Assembly after Assembly that one grasps something of the Glory of God, and the excellency of His power being expressed through our weakness.

I wish to offer some observations on where we find ourselves at this moment. Then I will suggest some concrete steps which might afford room for the Grace of God to operate among us, and deliver us from the dilemma arising from the eighth sederunt. These steps are by way of suggestion only. Use what is helpful. Please ignore the rest.

For those who care to see it, there is much that is positive in the concerns of each side in this debate.

There is on both sides a keen sense of loyalty, an identification with persons who are hurting, a sense of justice. The motivation on each side is rooted in caring. Let no one attribute lesser motives.

What most concerns me in this debate is the limits that are being drawn to that caring. I would to God that we might enlarge the borders of our caring, that it might include fully those with whom we most disagree. Whatever your point of view, know this: the hurt on the other side is genuine. And that hurt is deep.

We would all probably like to think of ourselves as ready to lay down our lives for others, if our Lord were to ask it of us. But are we ready to lay down our precious points of view, for the sake of others for whom Christ dies?

I believe the time has come for just that. If we cannot love one another with that kind of practical self-giving, we cannot be the Church.

Galatians 5:1, 13-15 (Jerusalem Bible)

When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery...My siblings, you were called, as you know, to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of The Law is summarized in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself. If you go snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces, you had better watch or you will destroy the whole community.

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HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

A section of The Board of World Mission's report to the 1981 General Assembly was entitled "Ethnic Churches and Church Growth". Two Recommendations from that section are printed below. *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, pgs. 424-425.

Recommendation 21:

That ethnic pastors qualified for ordination in a Reformed/Presbyterian Church in their homeland, be received into the ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada on application by Presbytery on the understanding that they will upgrade their qualifications after their acceptance, and that such upgrading where necessary be in their own language.

Recommendation 22:

That the following statement be approved:

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a pluralistic church. Among the congregations in many presbyteries, are congregations of various ethnic backgrounds, some of which are among the strongest congregations of our church. Among the membership of many congregations are people of various ethnic backgrounds who bring different Presbyterian and cultural traditions and add spiritual strength to these congregations. Some of them contribute welcome leadership.

We thank God for this growing pluralistic community of faith, and for the sharing, and new life, and growth which is occasions.

A pluralistic church also brings some challenges. One is to provide ordained ministers for congregations of minority language and cultural groups. Regulations and facilities designed to strengthen white English-speaking Presbyterians can have the reverse effect on ministry for Presbyterians of minority groups. Ways must be found that will enable and encourage an ordained ministry for this part of our Church, with appropriate standards and opportunities for training.

A related challenge is for congregations, presbyteries, and national boards and committees to seek out leadership from minority group Presbyterians. If we are a pluralistic church, we must be seen to be a pluralistic church. Representatives of the minority groups who make up the membership of our congregations must be given opportunity to use their gifts on Sessions, Boards, Church School staff, leadership of Presbytery Committees and national staff.

A third challenge which is of prime importance is racism. There are sometimes overt, and blatant expressions both in the church and the community, which must be challenged directly and publicly by members of the majority group, i.e., white English-speaking Presbyterians. Perhaps the larger challenge is in the subtler forms of racism, because while minority groups may be sensitive to these expressions, the members of the majority group are often oblivious, cavalier or even unintentional participants. A racially sensitive majority group will make for a strong pluralistic church.

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