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Draft SOC Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice

Food is essential for our survival and an important element in family and cultural life. Religions have devised food rules and rituals to promote group solidarity, to ensure human health, to hallow sentient life, and to provide food for the stranger and the poor. Religions have called for fasting as a spiritual discipline and prayers of petition and thanksgiving to God or gods for provision of food. In keeping with these religious traditions, we, Unitarian Universalists, are called to address our relationship with food. All of our seven principles call for recognition of and respect for the other—other people and other organisms. Ethical eating is the application of that perspective to food. What and how we eat has broad implications for our planet and our human society.

Food production involving growing, processing, transporting and distributing has become an increasingly large industry worldwide. The mass production of food often maximizes production while minimizing cost. This mass production has greatly increased food supply, but can result in overuse of fertilizers and pesticides with crops and mistreatment of food animals and workers in food production. The concept of ethical eating calls on us to seek compassion, health and sustainability in the production of food we raise or purchase. Ethical eating requires us to respect the organisms we eat and to choose foods produced in humane ways, protective of the environment, consumers and all those involved in production. We share with the organisms we eat common ancestors and the miracle of life. Yet, we, like all animals, must take the lives of plants or animals to live. We should do that mindful of the care due the interdependent web of life to which we belong.

Selective breeding of crops and animals has greatly increased their productivity over many years. Recently, genetic engineering has allowed the introduction of specialized genes into food organisms to provide new attributes. Cloning of animals has also been achieved with some species. These developments may offer great promise, but must be evaluated for unintended consequences.

Many people do not have adequate food supplies, while others have a surplus. Some locations on earth are much more suitable for plant growth and animal production than others. Weather conditions and armed conflicts can also expose many people to starvation. Many people in this world live in poverty, which can lead to hunger. We believe everyone should receive enough food to meet their needs. Paradoxically, the lack of access to healthy food in poverty can lead to obesity with its health problems.

More food calories are available worldwide the lower on a food chain food is harvested. Food chains usually start with plants, which are eaten by herbivores, which are then eaten by carnivores. Large amounts of energy are lost going up each level of a food chain. Eating lower on a food chain will leave more calories for the human population. But, there are some nutritional benefits for an individual eating meat. Eating a pound of meat provides more calories and nutrients than does a pound of grain. Some of us believe that it is ethical only to eat plants while others of us believe that it is equally ethical to eat both plants and animals. All of us agree that food animals should be treated humanely. We do not call here for a single dietary approach. Rather, we encourage a knowledgeable choice of food based on an understanding of the health effects of a particular food and the consequences of production, worker treatment, and transportation methods. We commit to putting this reflection into action, recognizing that for many people this will entail a dramatic change in eating choices.

As individuals, and as assembled congregations, we face complex choices in selecting our food. Often all of our ethical eating values cannot be fully realized in a single instance. These values include: taste, selection, cost, human health, benign environmental effects, humane treatment of food animals, and fair treatment of farm and food workers. We are obligated to advance these values. Examples of these value trade-offs are:

Taste versus Price—Large-scale farming may need to sacrifice some taste to allow products to arrive in a saleable state at reasonable cost.

Selection versus Environmental Impact—Food distributors can purchase out-of-season products from foreign countries to improve selection, but must transport the product long distances, generating more carbon dioxide that contributes to global warming.

Price versus Health—Food producers can increase crop yields and animal weight gains using fertilizers, growth-promoters, pesticides or antibiotics to keep prices low, but residues of these treatments can be damaging to human health.

Price versus Pollution and Mistreatment of Animals—Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) can produce large quantities of food animals at low cost to the consumer, but their high volume of animal wastes often pollute surrounding waters. CAFOs for cattle, pigs, chickens and turkeys also produce large amounts of market-ready animals, but mistreat the animals to minimize costs.

Price versus Worker Welfare—Food distributors can provide low-priced food by paying farm workers and food-processing workers low wages with poor working conditions.

One common element to the negative consequences of large-scale food production is the effort to minimize costs. One solution to lessen the incentive to minimize costs is to provide a market for ethical foods where consumers are willing to pay more for food that tastes good and is good for animals, the environment and workers.

Classism, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression are deeply connected to economic justice which is a prime determinant of access to food. Some of us will not be able to pay more for ethical food. Others of us will. Yet, all of us can have a role in improving the ethics of food. We affirm that to fight for environmental and economic justice is inherently a fight against all forms of oppression. As a result, ethical eating requires different ways of thinking about these issues that reflect their interconnected nature, and understand that this work will require creativity, patience and resolve.

Calls To Action

Individual Actions

We covenant to buy or raise food for ourselves and our families that:

- minimizes the pain and suffering of food animals by purchasing meat produced under humane conditions, such as free-range grass-fed beef, free-range chickens and turkeys, free-range produced chicken eggs, pigs not restrained in gestation or farrowing crates, fish and crustaceans responsibly farmed or sustainably caught;
- minimizes the negative environmental effects of raising animal or plant food organisms by purchasing organically-produced food, and fish and crustaceans certified responsibly farmed;
- requires a minimum of transport to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, unless purchase of organic products at a distance offers better treatment of animals or social benefits;
- supports a fair trade organization that meets Social Accountability Standard 8000, and its successors;
- includes food products certified as organic by a federal or state agency, as personal finances allow;
- is healthy and in quantities that do not lead to obesity; and

- increases our consumption of organisms lower on food chains.

We covenant to advocate for the benefit of food organisms, food workers, the environment and humanity by:

- asking food sellers where their products come from, what the treatment of food animals is, how the workers are treated, and how the surrounding environment is protected;
- telling food sellers that we will buy and pay more for food that treats food animals humanely, treats workers fairly, and protects the environment;
- helping to prevent hunger in our communities;
- continuing to press food stores to require suppliers to certify humane food animal treatment; and
- contacting federal and state representatives to support the distribution of adequate ethical food supplies to those needing it in the United States and worldwide.

Congregational Actions

As congregations, we covenant to:

- provide and sell organic and fair trade food at congregational events where practical;
- organize members to work for food justice by appealing to grocery chains to locate stores in poverty areas, assisting people in obtaining food stamps, appealing to state and federal legislators to provide more food funding for the poor, assisting local meals on wheels programs, and assisting charities in providing food assistance as a transition to government assistance;
- support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office in their efforts to alleviate world hunger and poverty;
- provide programs for all ages to inform them about the issues of food and environmental justice;
- conduct educational programs on nutrition and home or community gardens;
- participate in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA);
- become Green Sanctuary certified and include ethical eating in programs;
- advocate for healthful food for school lunches;
- support the Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network and its members in advocating for ethical eating priorities; and
- engage in direct action in solidarity with workers and labor advocacy groups to support agricultural and food workers.

The work of the UUA is made possible by the generosity of individual donors and gifts to the Annual Program Fund. Please consider **making a donation** (uua.kintera.org/friends) today to continue this important work.

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