

Draft Statement of Conscience  
Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice  
March 2011

We share with the living things we eat the miracle of life. Yet all animals must take the lives of plants or other animals to live. Eating ethically requires us to respect the organisms we eat and to choose foods produced in humane ways, protective of the environment, consumers, farmers, and all those involved in food production and distribution.

Environmental justice includes the equitable distribution of both environmental burdens and benefits on populations of residents. Marginalized people have often been able to find housing only in areas exposed to environmental pollutants with consequent negative health and quality of life effects.

As Unitarian Universalists, we 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 life forms. Ethical eating is the application of these principles to food. What and how we eat has broad implications for our planet and society. Our values, principles, and integrity call us to seek compassion, health and sustainability in the production of food we raise or purchase.

Food production involving growing, processing, packaging, transporting and distributing food has become a vast worldwide industry. The mass production of food often maximizes production while minimizing price. This mass production has greatly increased food supply, but has resulted in the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides with crops and the mistreatment of animals and workers in food production. Both this overuse and the large waste streams from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), result in pollution of water and land.

Access to an adequate supply of healthy food and clean water is a basic human need and right. Many people do not have adequate food supplies, while others have a surplus. In many locations, poor distribution of food is a major cause of hunger. The effects of climate change, weather conditions and armed conflicts can also expose many people to starvation. Paradoxically, an abundance of food does not guarantee access to healthy food.

We acknowledge that steps need to be taken that will ensure an adequate food supply for the fast-growing world population; reduce the use of energy, water, fertilizer, pesticides and hormones in food production; and reduce the inhumane treatment of animals. These steps point toward an eating pattern that emphasizes plant-based foods over animal-based foods.

Minimally-processed plant-based diets are healthier diets. Some of us believe that it is ethical only to eat plants while others of us believe that it is ethical to eat both plants and animals. We do not call here for a single dietary approach. We encourage a knowledgeable choice of food based on understanding the demands of feeding a growing world population, the health effects of particular foods and the consequences of production, worker treatment, and transportation methods. We commit to applying this knowledge to both personal and public actions, recognizing that many of us might embark on a dramatic change in eating choices and some might pay more for food that is ethically produced. For congregations, helping congregants gain this understanding and supporting their choices will require a long-term collective process of engagement, education, and discernment.

41 As individuals and as congregations, we recognize the need to examine the impact of our food  
42 choices and make changes that will lessen our burden on the rest of the world. We also recognize  
43 that many food decisions will require us to make trade-offs between competing priorities.  
44 These priorities include: taste, selection, price, human health, environmental protection,  
45 sustainability, adequate food supply, humane treatment of animals used for food, and fair  
46 treatment of farm and food workers.

47 **Environmental** concerns include the use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and hormones and  
48 high volumes of animal wastes produced by CAFOs, all of which can contaminate land and  
49 water. Contributors to global warming include the overreliance on fossil fuels for food  
50 production, the methane produced by cattle, and the long distance transport of food. Expanding  
51 agriculture and animal farming often removes natural habitats and reduces natural biodiversity.

52 **Human Health** concerns include producers' use of growth-promoters, pesticides and antibiotics  
53 that can affect child development, antibiotic resistance, and other health conditions. Advertising  
54 can encourage overeating, poor food choices, and a focus on body image that can lead to eating  
55 disorders.

56 Concerns about the **Humane Treatment of Animals** include crowding animals inhumanely in  
57 CAFOs and serious mistreatment of many animals used for food during slaughter.

58 Concerns about the **Fair Treatment of Food and Farm Workers** include low pay, poor  
59 working conditions, exploitation of undocumented workers and enslavement of others.

60 **Policy** concerns include agricultural subsidies that reward the production of certain crops and  
61 animal products that are less healthful and environmentally-friendly than unsubsidized ones and  
62 that penalize small to moderate sized farming operations. Agricultural subsidies of exported  
63 grains have driven small farmers in developing countries off their land because they are unable  
64 to compete on price.

65 We affirm that to work for environmental and economic justice is to work against many forms of  
66 oppression. All of us can contribute to a healthier, more equitable world by applying our UU  
67 principles to our actions related to food. Ethical eating requires us to approach these concerns  
68 with a recognition that they are interconnected and an understanding that learning to eat ethically  
69 will require creativity, patience and resolve.

## 70 **CALLS TO ACTION**

### 71 Individual Actions

72 We covenant to buy, raise and consume food for ourselves and our families that:

- 73 • increases our consumption of plant-based foods, which increases the global access to  
74 calories, provides health benefits, and prevents injuring animals;
- 75 • minimizes the pain and suffering of animals by purchasing meat or seafood produced  
76 under humane conditions, for those who choose to eat meat or seafood;
- 77 • minimizes the negative environmental effects of raising animals or plants by purchasing  
78 organically-produced food, and seafood certified responsibly farmed;

- 79 • minimizes transportation-related carbon dioxide emissions by obtaining foods locally  
80 produced through home or community gardens, farmers markets, or community  
81 supported agriculture (CSA);  
82 • provides farm workers with living wages by purchasing fair trade certified products;  
83 • contributes to social harmony by eating communally with others; and  
84 • promotes health, consuming food in quantities that do not lead to obesity.

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

- 87 • asking food sellers to label where their products come from to determine distance of  
88 transport;  
89 • telling food sellers that we will buy and pay more for food produced by treating animals  
90 humanely, treating workers fairly, and protecting the environment;  
91 • pressing food sellers to require that their suppliers certify the humane treatment of  
92 animals; and  
93 • advocating for federal and state legislation that supports the distribution of adequate  
94 ethical food supplies, effective safety inspection of food production, and realignment of  
95 agricultural subsidies to support growing more produce and the viability of small  
96 farmers.

97 Congregational Actions

98 As congregations, we covenant to:

- 99 • provide and sell more plant-based, organic, and fair trade foods at congregational events;  
100 • organize members to work for food justice by urging grocery chains to locate stores in  
101 low income neighborhoods, helping people obtain food stamps, advocating for increased  
102 funding to alleviate hunger, and assisting local meals on wheels and food bank  
103 programs;  
104 • support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Unitarian Universalist United  
105 Nations Office and other relevant UU organizations in their efforts to ensure that  
106 everyone has adequate nutritious food, produced sustainably;  
107 • provide educational programs for all ages that address the issues of environmental justice,  
108 gardening, food preparation and nutrition;  
109 • become Green Sanctuary certified and include ethical eating in programs;  
110 • advocate for healthful food for school lunches and other institutional meals; and  
111 • engage in direct action and in solidarity with workers and labor advocacy groups to  
112 support agricultural and food workers.

113 **With gratitude and reverence for all life, we savor food mindful of all that has contributed**  
114 **to it. We commit ourselves to a more equitable sharing of the earth's bounty.**