

Workshop: Cheap food and creation care – a contradiction?

Presenter: Elbert Van Donkersgoed

Elbert Van Donkersgoed offered a lively workshop on the price of food, arguing that food in Canada is too cheap. We need to be willing to pay more for our food, in part to be fairer in compensating the farmers who produce it and in part to finance food production reforms that will serve to enhance and protect the integrity of the environment. Van Donkersgoed backed up his thesis with a number of graphs and many bits of statistical information as he demonstrated that payments to farmers (measured in real dollars, with the inflation factor removed) have gradually declined over the course of many years. He also provided some interesting economic analyses, making it clear in the process that it will not suffice to say that we need to go back to patterns of food production that prevailed a century ago, when the agrarian values of our grandparents' generation still flourished.

One of the questions raised concerned the role of the organic approach to agriculture as a possible solution to the woes being discussed. Van Donkersgoed argued that while organic food may be superior from a nutritional standpoint, the purchase thereof on the part of concerned citizens will not go far toward countering the forces he was analysing.

In the course of his presentation, Van Donkersgoed demonstrated a deep concern for farm families and also for the land on which they live. He envisioned the countryside as a place of delight for those who live there permanently as well as for those in the city who visit there on occasion. But it is being taken over, partly by industrial farming centres that spoil the land and partly by sheer urban sprawl. He pointed out that we are making ever more intensive use of less and less farmland, thereby placing quite a strain on the land that we do still farm. In the meantime, other farmland is being converted to urban use at an alarming rate. Field after field is being taken out of production as it yields one final cash-rich crop in the form of houses.

Who has the power and authority to do something about the bad trends pointed out by Van Donkersgoed? Here the workshop participants disagreed. Some favoured the mechanism of the free market others, including Van Donkersgoed himself, saw more of a role for governments. The debate between the two sides was still raging when the allotted time for the workshop had elapsed and the workshop was adjourned.

Reporter: Theo Plantinga