Response to the “Becoming a Good Food Nation “ Discussion document from the Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) Rural Committee (Scottish Churches Rural Group).

Action of Churches Together in Scotland brings together all of the principal churches in Scotland. It carries out its work through a series of networks and working groups. The Rural Committee brings together those churches with interest in our rural communities and in the activities such as farming, forestry and food production, which occur, in a rural setting. Current active membership of the group includes the Church of Scotland, The Roman Catholic Church, The Scottish Episcopal Church, The Methodist Church, The United Reformed Church, The Congregational Federation and the Baptist Union.

Issues related to food have long been important to the work of the group. Food is an intensely Biblical topic. Food, its production, preparation its place in the lives of individuals and communities is one of the most frequently referenced subjects in Scripture. Fair Trade in food, adequate supply of food to all and a balance in land use between food and other uses have long been major elements in the agenda’s of Churches in Scotland. In recent years the ACTS Rural Group have published a paper on Food Security in an International Theological Journal: Atkinson, D etal, Food Security: A Churches together approach. Rural Theology 10, 27-42. We have also worked with Eco-Congregation Scotland to produce a document designed to encourage discussion of food issues in Church Congregations across Scotland; “Why Worry About Food” This document covers areas such as environmental impact of food production, population impact, global climate change and contentious issues such as biotechnology as well as guidance as to how churches might get involved in food issues and food production. All of these areas resonate with both the Unfinished Business and with the priority areas identified in the discussion document.

Our committee welcomes the production of the discussion Document as a means of raising the profile of food issues in Scotland at this time. The Publication of Recipe for Success achieved this some years ago but we recognise that it is important to keep food as an issue in both public and governmental vision.
As an organisation which looks at the whole range of rural issues we remain concerned about the pressures, which face all who live in rural communities, and especially about the pressures currently being experienced by primary producers. The Discussion paper places considerable emphasis on the importance of economic targets and on financial growth. It underplays the stresses, which have been experienced by small Scottish Producers as a consequence of the attempts by large retailers to undercut competitors. Being a good food nation requires that we fairly reward our producers. While it would be unhelpful to attempt to apply the rules of our current internationally based fair trade schemes to Scottish Producers the same principles ought to apply. It is important that a fare trade ethic should underpin a good nation food policy and this must mean more of the end consumer price being returned to the primary producer.

We applaud the selection of priority areas in section 9 of the document although we would have wished for a positive emphasis on helping those who currently suffer from Food Poverty and beyond just children in this category. Food banks are the visible symptom of this crisis. As currently rum food banks boost our carbon footprint, provide food with a questionable health profile and all too often require those who are usually also Fuel Poor to have to devote more of limited resources to cooking. A thought through set of alternative means of getting healthy food to the food poor through direct links with both conventional and community based producers Good food choices require there being alternative routes to market for Scottish produce especially that coming from small producers. It is important that the contribution of small producers is positively recognised and seen as an essential component in a good food nation. Such recognition would help to sustain the diversity of production, which is important to the vibrancy of our rural communities.

In several places the document acknowledges the links between food targets and environmental issues such as climate change. The document, other than recognising the importance of local production, makes little comment on how food is produced. We hold no specific brief for either organic production methods or for crofting although we recognise that both have favourable environmental footprints compared to some other forms of
production. We would suggest that a good food nation should not support means of production, which are damaging to the environment. Food produced with a significant environmental footprint cannot be considered to be quality food regardless of what its chemical or microbiological profile might suggest. We would suggest that it is important that the means of production should become part of the remit of the new food commission.

This also links to the issues posed in questions 2 and 7 which as for indicators of progress or achievement. Experience of the use of indicators of this type in other areas has suggested that specific indicators can be a very blunt tool and can result in a focus on that indicator rather than a more complex issue to which it has perhaps a tenuous relationship. Before focussing on specific indicators it matters to appraise the impact of such an approach in health care and education where it is recognised that they have often been distorting. Food is at least as complex and given the social factors involved it is important that success is not judged in such a way. Economic goals would be among the easiest to put in place but would drive the system in a single direction when a braided approach is required. That said there clearly are areas linked to health and diet where indicators could with value be put in place just as monitoring the proportion of our children who get an adequate diet would be one of the key tests as to whether we had become a good food nation.

Earlier we expressed concern that food had moved from the front of the political agenda. We think that maintaining a clear focus is important. We recognise that in recent years we have in Scotland adopted a range of approaches to developing food policy from having a food Tsar to a food champions group. If a food commission is felt to be the appropriate conventional vehicle then we would support its creation but only if it were to be broadly drawn both in relation to the range of sectors covered but also in terms of the range of organisations and communities represented. A commission dominated by supermarkets, the drink manufactures and major processors might represent a high proportion of those responsible for getting food and drink to the Scottish public but it would not be representative. Nor should it be assumed that an umbrella organisation such as the NFUS can speak for all producers or Scotland Food and Drink speak for the complete food
chain. The membership of Scotland’s Churches may be smaller than in earlier years but we remain Scotland’s largest mass membership organisation and have the greatest geographic spread and local presence. Given the importance of food in Scripture we would be pleased to help achieve greater success in improving awareness of the issues and in being advocates for the dialogue with the food poor.

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