BURGERS AND BURPS: DIET AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) “Code Red for human driven global heating” Report tells us there is little time to control planet temperature increases before non-reversible turning points are reached/exceeded. The report focuses on reducing greenhouse gas (GHG)—CO2 and methane—emissions.

While fossil fuel use is the primary source of GHG, surprisingly, more than 15% of the total GHG emissions can be attributed to our food system. Cattle are major contributors. If the world’s 1 billion cows were a country, they’d rank third in GHG. More than 75% of farmland is dedicated to raising and feeding animals for our food supply, yet they supply only 37% of our global protein and 18% of our global calories. Cows' methane belching is a significant GHG source. Recent research promises that this amount can be reduced by as much as 82% by adding natural additives like seaweed to their diet.

But what can be done about humans’ desire for eating meat? How willing are we to give up grilling hamburgers and steak, ordering meat at restaurants, eating meat at home, etc.? An alternative protein source that looks like and tastes like meat is needed to reduce our desire for animal meat.

Plant-based proteins have entered the market as a viable meat alternative that is scaling up fast —45% growth in 2020. Plant-based proteins are now marketed in supermarket packaged meat departments and at fast food restaurants such as McDonalds.
Based on recent protein-binding research, cultured meats—synthetic, lab-grown and cell-based meats—that look like, cook like and taste like meat--are entering the market. In time, cultured meats will become more popular and begin to significantly replace animal protein and calorie choices.

Home food consumption habits can also change. Research at John Hopkins concluded that a “two-thirds vegan diet,” restricting meat and dairy to a maximum of one serving apiece per day, would cut livestock emissions by as much as 60%. We can consciously reduce eating animal protein at mealtimes. As an example, consider introducing “Meatless Mondays” in your weekly meal plan. Reducing food waste will also reduce GHG emissions, and possibly also your food budget.

The IPCC’s “Code Red” warning reminds us that our world faces an existential threat—to both its animal and plant inhabitants. We all need “to-be-onboard” to respond to this crisis.

Sources:
*Speed & Scale: An Action Plan for Solving Our Climate Crisis Now. John Doerr, Penguin Random House, 2021.
*World population projected to reach 9.8 billion in 2050, and 11.2 billion in 2100. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
*Lab Grown Meat; CNN Fareed Zakaria GPS; 2021.
*Billion Dollar Burger, Chase Purdy. Penguin Random House. June 16, 2020.

(Barry Miller, Creation Care Committee, Central UMC)