



HSUS

GOES TO CHURCH

How the Humane Society of the United States aims to influence animal agriculture issues through churches.

By Gil Gullickson,
Crops Technology Editor

Illustration by William Duke

FARMING AND FAITH FIT LIKE A BASEBALL GLOVE FOR DALE ASHER AND HIS FAMILY, WHO FARM NEAR SUTTER, ILLINOIS.

“A successful farmer is one who goes to heaven and brings other people with him,” says Asher, who farms with wife Cindy, son Garrett, and daughter-in-law Rachel. “As farmers, we are naturally drawn to God. How could we not be, when we are out there in God’s creation every single day?”



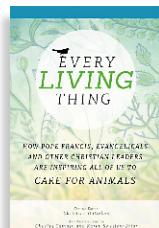
Dale Asher

ogy professionals from Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic faiths.

Besides advising HSUS on faith programs, they also serve as faith community ambassadors regarding animal stewardship.

“We rely on them for guidance, but they also go to their communities of faith and share our message of animal stewardship and protection,” says Reasa Currier, HSUS faith outreach director.

• **Movies.** In 2008, HSUS released a film called *Eating Mercifully*. “This is a film on factory farming from a Christian perspective,” says Currier. “It is the most requested resource at HSUS. It is screened at dozens of churches every year.”



• **Church statements.** In 2011, HSUS hosted a Religious Leaders Summit in Washington, D.C. Faith leaders met with HSUS officials to discuss animal welfare issues. This resulted in the Southern Baptist Convention and other entities drafting the *Evangelical Statement on Responsible Care for Animals*.

Although HSUS played no role in drafting the statement, Currier says HSUS supports it. “We know it has resonance with a lot of Evangelicals,” she says.

• **An online library of religious statements on animals.** This was created in response to questions from parishioners wondering what their church’s

stance was regarding animal protection, says Currier. These statements have been compiled online and in a book called *Every Living Thing*.

• **A Sunday school and vacation Bible school curriculum.**

“Through these and other resources, we reach out to hundreds of churches each year,” Currier says.

People of faith played

a role in establishing the HSUS, says Currier.

“The outreach program was formed as a reflection of our roots in the faith community,” she adds. “The Gospel is clear that we have a Biblical mandate to be stewards of God’s creation.”

UNDER THE RADAR

“This has been an under-the-radar movement,” says Kay Johnson Smith, president and CEO of the Animal Agriculture Alliance, a nonprofit group of food industry stakeholders. “Yet, HSUS has made a lot of headway and is now showing itself more directly.”

“Within certain denominations, there have been issues raised about food and how animals are raised under modern agriculture,” she says. “The efficiencies of housing and confinement have become issues that are starting to surface in churches and their policies, doctrines, and directives shared with congregations.”

Two decades ago, Christian theology was one of the bulwarks against the animal rights movement, says Wes Jamison, a public relations professor at Palm

NEW KID IN CHURCH

These days, this intersection between farming and faith is gaining more players. Among them is a group that many farmers and livestock groups believe antagonizes them – the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). The HSUS has initiated faith outreach programs that include the following.

• **Establishment of faith councils** that involve 15 clergy and theol-

Beach Atlantic University who has studied the issue. Since then, Jamison says groups like HSUS have reframed Biblical teachings in order to make parishioners feel guilty about animal treatment and consumption.

Jamison says targets include Evangelical pet owners who belong to churches that don't follow literal Biblical doctrines.

"These Evangelicals who have pets have a different relationship with animals than farmers have with animals," he says.

Responding to the HSUS faith initiative has been difficult, says Johnson Smith.

"Religion is one of those topics most don't talk about with friends and families over dinner," she says. "It is sensitive and personal."

The Animal Agriculture Alliance began monitoring the intersection of faith and farming in 2008 when it partnered with the Nebraska Farm Bureau to fund research by Jamison. Findings show that people of faith do the following.

- **Have sustained beliefs.** Once committed, people of faith don't disregard beliefs.
- **Contribute money to causes they believe in.** "HSUS

approaches this from a fundraising angle," says Johnson Smith. "Animal cruelty issues appeal to a sense of compassion that people of faith have. If they (HSUS) can make people feel guilty about eating animals, they (parishioners) will give money to this cause."

It enables HSUS to stealthily attack the livestock industry, says Daryl Lies, a Douglas, North Dakota, farmer and NDFB (Farm Bureau) president.

"They cherry-pick verses out of the Bible and mold them to their thinking," says Lies. "They (churches) fall into the trap that this is an animal care organization, rather than one that wants to end

all animal ownership, from cats and dogs to livestock animals. The HSUS is not the friend of any animal owner."

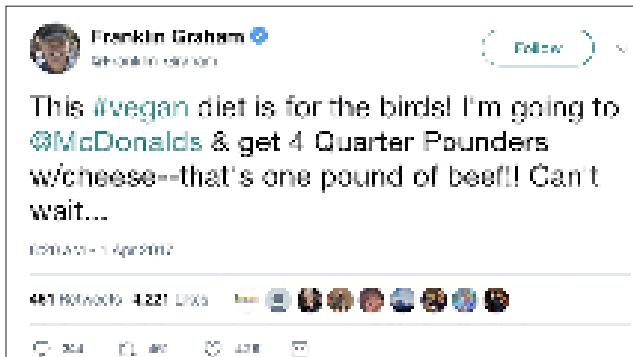
The HSUS has formed agriculture advisory councils with farmers in 12 states. It hasn't worked out with all farmers, says Hannah Thompson-Weeman, vice president of communications for the Animal Agriculture Alliance.



Kay Johnson Smith



Daryl Lies



VEKING VEGANISM

Abstaining from consuming animal products through veganism has even entered the faith arena. Christian evangelist Franklin Graham tried it in 2017, although he found out it wasn't for him after a few months.

Veganism is also the end goal of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), says Kay Johnson Smith, CEO and president of the Animal Agriculture Alliance. "HSUS wants to drive people away from eating meat by creating a distrust of farmers and ranchers," she says. The Alliance cites past statements by HSUS leaders saying veganism is its end goal.

Scott Beckstead, HSUS rural affairs director, disagrees. "We are a big-tent organization," he says. "There are omnivores, carnivores, vegetarians, vegans, hunters, and nonhunters. HSUS is not out to create a vegan world. We want to create a more humane world." **SF**

"Several prominent members of the council have since left after realizing that HSUS is opposed to all animal production and that they would be the target sooner or later," she says.

Mike Callicrate doesn't see it that way. The St. Francis, Kansas, rancher, who also sells beef in Colorado, serves on a Colorado HSUS farmer advisory council. He's a director and past president of the Organization for

Competitive Markets, which focuses on agricultural anti-trust and trade policy.

"I have looked to find one farmer or rancher who HSUS has put out of business," he says. "I can't."

He says what has helped put livestock producers out of business are industry and farm groups who have lobbied against antitrust and market concentration issues.

"We don't agree with HSUS on everything, but we have a lot in common with the humane treatment of animals," he says.

CORPORATE FARMING BATTLES

Churches and farm groups were tussling over agricultural policy long before animal welfare and animal rights groups entered the fray.

"I am a Catholic," says Daryl Lies, a Douglas, North Dakota, farmer who is NDFB (Farm Bureau) president. "I have had a parting of ways (with the Roman Catholic Church) on certain aspects in how it says food should be produced. It hasn't occurred in my (local) church, but lobbyists for the Catholic churches have been opposed to the corporate structure (that farmers use for financial and business planning). They are almost saying it is amoral if you have a corporate structure."

Concerns about corporate agriculture from the Roman Catholic Church

are rooted in principles dating back to 1939, says Christopher Dodson, executive director of the North Dakota Catholic Conference.

That's when the National Catholic Rural Life Council published *Manifesto on Rural Life*, which expressed concern about the application of factory-style labor, management, and ownership to agriculture. It argued that agriculture should be protected from the factorization of farms, says Dodson.

"Underlying the entire document is the concern of how industrialization of farms will affect the family – the social institution that occupies 'the place of primacy' and is 'the best guardian and defender of the human race,'" he says. **SF**

WHAT HSUS SAYS CHURCHES SAY

The Humane Society of the United States has compiled statements on animal welfare that it says a number of church denominations make. To see what's being said about your church, go to <http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith/facts/statements/> 

CAFO CONCERNS

Confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are a flash point for the HSUS.

"I leave it to the words of (the late) Cardinal Francis George, who said that CAFOs are not family farms, but factories," says Currier.

A January 22, 2010, story in the *National Catholic Reporter* quoted the Chicago Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church in 1999 as saying, "At some point in time, we crossed the line and some of these facilities became factories – not farms as we once knew them."

"I think that says it best," says Currier. "When we are confining animals to crates and restricting natural movements that God intended for them to engage in, and restricting behavior that God intended them to have, then we have violated the duty of God's creation."

HSUS-recommended humane treatment includes outdoor livestock production or production where animals

have ample room to move.

"For the most part, this means that animals are pasture-raised, that they spend their days out on grass, with sunshine on their backs surrounded by others of their own kind," says Scott Beckstead, HSUS rural affairs director. "This is opposed to being kept in large barns with thousands and tens of thousands of other animals and generating huge amounts of waste. This causes problems for animals, the environment, for their neighbors, and for surrounding communities."

CHRISTIAN OBLIGATION

The Reverend Steven L. Ullestad remembers working on a farm while in high school that had one milk cow. Meanwhile, his wife grew up on a farm that milked 50 to 60 cows.

"Now, I know there are some operations that have hundreds, if not thousands, of cows milked up to three times a day," says the bishop

of the Iowa Northeastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "That doesn't mean it's bad. That means it's changed. The livestock can still be cared for. I don't know of anyone who respects livestock more than a farmer."

That's something that Asher says he, his family, and farmers do each day.

"It is a Christian obligation to treat animals humanely," he says. "We feed them to be healthy, we take care of them to be healthy, we want them in their best condition. We're not going to get up every four hours and take care of calves if we didn't care about them."

"Meeting some other individual's or group's idea of 'humane' is more likely going to drive my cost of production up," adds Asher. "If you increase the cost of meat, how does that not deprive those who need it? Is (feeding hungry people) not a Christian concern?"

IS THERE COMMON GROUND?

Julia Johnson thinks so. She's a master of divinity student at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, and former intern for the HSUS. Johnson majored in religious studies and minored in agricultural policy at Michigan State University (MSU) before heading to divinity school. While at MSU, she says she took animal welfare and behavior

classes and worked with an MSU animal scientist who mentored her regarding the slaughter process in both small- and large-scale processing plant situations.

She prefers HSUS-recommended practices, such as the pastured pigs that she worked with at MSU. Still, her experiences left her with the impression that both sides can learn from each other while keeping faith principles intact.

"Those using the sustainable pasture-raised concept can learn about productivity and efficiency, and those using the industrial model can learn about humane standards and animal behavior," she says.

Lies remains wary of HSUS efforts, particularly its faith initiatives.

"We need to hold those accountable with whom we interact (in churches)," he says. "They are not serving HSUS. They are serving people in that congregation, and they need to understand those in the congregation and the importance of what they do." 

LEARN MORE

Ever heard of Meatless Mondays? Or why the Humane Society of the United States says it gets a bad rap among farmers and farm groups? Go to Agriculture.com/HSUS.



Gil Gullickson has included crop production in his agronomic coverage for several decades. Email Gil.Gullickson@meredith.com

WHAT TO DO

If your views on livestock production run counter to those of the Humane Society of the United States, the Animal Agriculture Alliance has compiled a resource kit that can be ordered at info@animalagalliance.org.

"This can help farmers and ranchers to better understand this issue and give them guidance in having conversations with their own church leadership," says Kay Johnson Smith, president and CEO of the Animal Agriculture Alliance.

She also advises farmers and ranchers to do the following.

- **Proactively have conversations with church leaders.**

"They could say, 'I know you have seen some negative things about farmers,'" says Johnson Smith. "I am a member of the congregation. I am here to help you understand what we do and share with you our commitment to producing wholesome food for the public and to answer any questions you may have."

- **Use social media and conventional media to tell your farm's story.**

"It's a way to say, 'I am a farmer and a Christian, and here is my commitment to my animals,'" says Johnson Smith. Inviting journalists to visit a farm, taking time to write a letter to the editor, or submitting a counter story are all ways to support the industry, she says. 