**Agricultural Chaplain’s Comments**

“Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy” - This hymn was written in the sixteenth/seventeenth century and could be applied to the agricultural scene today; with so many changes being introduced, it's very difficult to keep up and then wonder what is round the corner to come next.

There has been a mixed reaction to the SFI (Sustainable Farming Incentive) scheme, with only 200 farmers signing up to take part, but since the revised payments there are now 100's applying. Since DEFRA, (Department for farming and rural affairs) introduced the scheme it is hoped for an uptake of 70%. We are not there yet. The other scheme introduced by DEFRA is the ELMS (Environment Land Management Scheme) which some farmers are saying they are already farming to the principles in the guidelines, what they consider best practice. The objectors are the upland farmers who suggest a reduction in income by some 50%. £98/ha for uplands and £151/ha for lowlands. A Professor asks why flowers in upland are worth less than lowland.

Moving on to cereal growers, which there are a lot of in the East Anglia region, a year ago wheat was £212 per tonne this year £304 until this week down to £212. Fertiliser price rose to over £700 per tonne, and now a huge reduction, just when farmers have purchased for this season. There appears to be enough malting barley available. Perhaps people are not drinking as much with money needed to pay for the rise in fuel. Oil Seed Rape is still holding on as a break crop and profitable, which makes a change. The dry spell last year affected sugar beet and maize, but by delaying harvesting things recovered. The early sugar beet contract for the Bury St Edmunds factory was taken up by March 6th, guaranteed £3k per hectare.

There is a surprising increase in demand for pork, where pigs have been losing money for over 2 years. I have wondered how they have kept going, especially with feed prices so high. Beef and lamb are enjoying better prices but milk is in a difficult period, especially if you have not got a contract. Poultry are suffering with restrictions, where free range laying hens have to be kept inside, so there are not free range eggs available at present. Research into producing a vaccine might be available soon. Demand for table birds is still quite high.

Seeing empty shelves in supermarkets is something we are not used to, but with a shortfall in labour, this could go on for some time. The government has issued licence for some migrants to come here to help with harvesting vegetables, but the farmers will have to guarantee a minimum of a 32 hour week. We must address food waste and if it's grown every effort should be made to harvest it.

On a brighter note the countryside is looking green again and if you see a field of flowers it will probably be diversification rather than for harvesting pretty flowers. The Genesis quote of “seed time and harvest shall not cease” is still applicable today.

God bless you all. **George W Frost, District Agricultural Chaplain**