As investors, ICCR members want to see companies in which they hold stock grow. As long-term, socially responsible, and faith-consistent investors, however, we also want to see this growth happen sustainably. And in a world in which overweight and obesity are the fifth leading risk factor for death, maintaining and/or aggressively marketing a portfolio of unhealthy food and beverage products is not a sustainable business model. Particularly in mature markets, the food industry has begun to respond to the risks and opportunities presented by growing consumer awareness of the importance of nutrition for health. Food, restaurant, and retail companies are increasing the numbers of offerings in their portfolios that are healthy or at least better-for-you to keep their brands relevant in this changing environment. But some of these same companies continue to identify consumers of color in industrialized countries and the vast populations of newer consumers in rapidly-developing economies overseas as major “growth markets” for their traditional and, perhaps, less healthy products.

Domestically, brands compete hard for shelf space in dollar stores, which African American and Latino consumers patronize more frequently than the general population. With communities of color at elevated risk for diet-related diseases and one in five U.S. children experiencing food insecurity, the nutritional quality of foods sold at the deepest discounts matters. At the same time, companies are investing heavily in expanding their operations in emerging markets such as India and China, with some businesses committing entire divisions to the sole goal of achieving growth in these economies. In these countries, too, where widespread micronutrient deficiencies persist even as obesity-linked diseases such as type II diabetes spread at explosive rates, companies have a responsibility to consider the public health consequences of the rapid expansion of their own business.

We at ICCR are asking companies to make consideration of local nutrition needs an integral part of their growth strategy. This means not just acting through philanthropic channels to address hunger and encourage physical activity, but gaining an understanding of the nutrition and public health needs of consumers and using this knowledge to drive innovation, prompt reformulation of existing products, and shape parameters for responsible marketing practices. Companies need to adopt this approach globally, wherever they do business — or risk exacerbating the already-stark health disparities that exist between communities.

Sr. Gwen Farry
Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary