



FAITH | ENVIRONMENT

AND INDEED IT IS VERY GOOD

A PASTORAL LETTER

ON FAITH AND ENVIRONMENT:

LIVING IN COMMUNITY

WITH GOD'S CREATION

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I.

Light and darkness, water and land, sea creatures, earth creatures, birds, plants, herbs, fruit trees, the sky with its stars, moon, and sun! All mutually co-exist in an ever evolving symphony of praise to their Creator. Indeed, the creating, redeeming, and sustaining presence of our God weaves the fabric of creation. Together we sing a hymn of holy love for the beauty of the earth as it evolves and we with it, in relationship with one who has called us to love the world.

Faithful to the scripture which declares creation “very good,” following the witness of the cloud of ancestors, we respond in worship. We befriend creation. Inspired by the gift of humanity’s participation with the hum and pulse of this good earth; we work for well-being with a prophetic heart of justice.

Our theological sense of place and the natural sciences reveal in startling, magnificent ways a profound relationship among living beings, the elements, and all matter of the universe. The social and the environmental dance together. Each species and habitat, each culture and region, each place and people in the world expresses the divine image. Each embodies an inherent worth that is indeed sacred and good, worthy not only of care, but also of celebration and appreciation in the living of our days.

Everything created praises God. From the tiniest atom to far flung stars and the highest mountain and the widest sea; from the living soil to creatures whose names we do not know, to human communities and to each of us seeking a way in the world; God’s creation sings a hymn of the universe. Our lives intersect and mingle. The ecological order of living things demonstrates a beauty that inspires moral courage to respond to God still speaking through the processes of life in a mutually co-existing community. Can we respond fully to the privilege and responsibility to care for God’s creation with this depth of intimacy? Dare our church live into these days needing a new and keen attention to those parts of creation that cry for a restorative justice? For new ways of tending are required and simple beauties await recognition.

II.

Guided by our faith in a creating God, trusting in the redemptive power of the body of Christ, and sustained by the Spirit filling our lives with gentle strength, our church has a faith and hope to understand why creation cries. We possess a reservoir of resources and creativity to respond with healing practices: socially, economically, environmentally, culturally, and in our ecumenical and interfaith partnerships.

Why does creation cry? Creation cries because neighborhoods populated by racial minorities and the poor continue to be the resting places for commercial hazardous waste sites, affecting health and quality of life. Creation cries as alarming rates of green house gas emissions in the earth’s atmosphere result in global warming and its associated climate changes. Poor and vulnerable communities suffer as rising seas swamp island nations, floods and storms threaten coastlines displacing entire villages of indigenous people, and the loss of mountain top ice and snow threatens to starve communities living below.¹

We all face illness, famine, greater air pollution, land degradation, weakened economic infrastructure, frequent and more intense heat waves, rising sea levels with flooding, droughts, wildfires and extinction of species. But the poor, particularly women and children, are most vulnerable along with our neighboring species. “Climate change affects us all, but it does not affect us all equally.”²

Recent statements by the World Council of Churches reflecting on the 10th anniversary of the Kyoto Protocol³ explain the greater ecological debt owed by developed nations:

*Climate change is both an environmental issue and a matter of justice. Major green house gas (GHG) emitters have a historic responsibility to assume, to stop and to reverse the current trend. Developing countries, while looking for better conditions for their people, face a dilemma which should be confronted in looking for ways not to repeat the path that led to the present situation. The current unsustainable production and consumption patterns have caused tremendous negative effects in the environment and generated what has been called an ecological debt towards humanity and the earth.*⁴

The social and the environmental dance together. Each species and habitat, each culture and region, each place and people in the world expresses the divine image.

¹ Kevin Watkins, *Human Development Report 2007/2008, Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2007).

² Ban-Ki Moon, United Nations Secretary-General

³ Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, an agreement reached in December 1997 that has mandatory commitments for each country to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 2012.

⁴ World Council of Churches, “Minute on global warming and climate change,” Document GEN/PUB 05 (extract).

Humanity is asked to answer a call of stewardship understood as care *for* and solidarity *with* God's good creation. The distinction between humanity and other created things begins to soften, inviting a profound kinship, all participating in a creation community. In a time of environmental concern, the church must respond with its gifts of faith and nurture to work against reckless, negligent, or prejudicial use of natural resources.

Our worshipping life celebrates the Creator's intrinsic nature of provider and sustainer. It boldly inspires faith practices of solidarity and community to care for those in harm's way. We are asked to speak against the discriminatory placement of toxic waste sites that disregard environmental regulations. We are moved to support one another in our congregations to decrease our use of energy and fossil fuels, such as gasoline, heating oils, other petroleum based products, and coal. We study global issues involving quality of life, clean water, food supplies, and vital habitats for God's creatures.

Remembering the beauty of the earth, we are given gifts of grace and attention to celebrate the extravagant gifts of regional cultures, rural and urban, and the geographic and ecological landscapes of each. Wisdom is required to care for them.

III.

The United Church of Christ has a rich theological heritage and social activism history. We celebrate an inclusive hospitality for the love of neighbor in God, recognizing issues that unjustly affect community. But at times our recognition of these injustices has not risen to the level of robust advocacy. Such is the case with our environment.

Our call to become good stewards in God's ever evolving creation is reflected in the many resolutions passed addressing our environment. Beginning in 1959 with the Second General Synod, whereby there was a "call to Christian action in society, 'includ[ing] [a] call for conservation and development of the Earth's resources for the benefit of all people now and in the future.'" This resolution, and similar ones drafted at succeeding synods, reflects our consciousness of the injustices threatening our environment.

However, we did not become actively engaged in environmental justice until Warren County, North Carolina residents enlisted the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice in 1982. Consisting primarily of poor African Americans, the group from Warren County responded to the State of North Carolina's decision to place a toxic waste landfill of PCB's in their community. The PCB's had been illegally dumped along the roadway of fourteen counties. This incident resulted in a peaceful protest and more than 500 people were arrested. It further resulted in the groundbreaking report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. This report and the subsequent report released twenty years later, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty*, show a

direct correlation between the placement of toxic waste facilities and communities of racial minorities and the poor. These reports continue to inform our communities, positively impacting legislation and court cases as issues of environment and discrimination are decided.

Since the Warren County incident and the publication of the *Toxic Wastes and Race* report, the United Church of Christ has remained engaged in environmental justice issues. Generally, our involvement in the environmental justice movement has been viewed as only addressing environmental racism, "the intentional placement of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries in communities inhabited mainly by African Americans, [Latinos/as], Native Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, migrant farm workers, and the working poor."⁵ However,

*The environmental justice movement is concerned about addressing all inequalities that are the result of human settlement, industrial contamination and development . . . [It] is concerned about wetlands, birds and wilderness areas; it is also concerned, however, about urban habitats, about reservations, about the things that are happening [along] the US-Mexican border, about children poisoned by lead in their own homes and about children playing in contaminated parks and playgrounds.*⁶

Deepening our activism, the United Church of Christ at its Twenty-fifth General Synod passed two resolutions to address the energy and climate change crisis. The first resolution "call[s] for environmental education and action" and the second calls "on supporting congregations and providing guidance for stewardship of God's creation during the coming period of declining fossil fuels." To engage both resolutions, volunteers from the United Church of Christ created the Environmental and Energy Task Force that works closely with the Environmental Justice Program.

IV.

There are many ways to engage environmental justice work, integrating a celebration of creation's inherent worth and inspiring prophetic practice. There are many paths to address eco-social injustices such as environmental racism and climate change. We must, in this new moment of need, respond in the many ways we are called as individuals, churches and communities, moving forward as good stewards.

For some, interests may lie with energy conservation, prompting recycling, buying energy efficient appliances, weatherizing homes (churches or businesses, etc.),

⁵ Dr. Carlos J. Correa Bernier, United Church of Christ Minister for Environmental Justice, *Almost Everything You Need to Know about Environmental Justice*.

⁶ *Ibid*.

carpooling or using mass transportation, decreasing water usage and restoring watersheds, learning about organic and sustainable agriculture, replacing light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs, laundering with cold water, unplugging appliances not in use, decreasing thermostat temperature in the winter and increasing it in the summer.

Others may have a passion to address the placement of hazardous waste sites in communities of racial minorities and the poor; promoting proper disposal of batteries and toxic chemicals; becoming educated on the issues and becoming involved with grassroots efforts to address legislation and regulations that will directly impact these communities. Still others may have a desire to learn more about interrelated local and global ecological and social issues with attention to a critical presence at the points of greatest need. Some may be inspired to attend the Ecumenical Advocacy Days conference, or participate in an immersion transformation experience near the border (perhaps at Centro Romero) or service abroad.

One thing is certain: for the love of the earth and one another, we may not remain indifferent. We are called to face the challenges with a deep sense of urgency and hopeful attention. We are called to invite those who seek, who love, who lament and who act on prophetic and imaginative dreams, to journey with us. Come; let us build greening places and spaces for the holy and one another.

Worshipping God in prayer and communion, energizing community transformation, our efforts become a breathing with the world. We dare to move forward with practices of care and devotions of nurturing “creation communities.”

For a complete set of resources, including Suggestions for Congregational Use, go to ucc.org/earthcare or call, toll free, 866-822-8224 ext. 3714.

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V.

The call to respond to climate change, with practices that sustain creation and the most vulnerable, is critical. In February 2008, the central committee of the World Council of Churches implored churches to:

strengthen their moral stand in relationship to global warming and climate change, recalling its adverse effects on poor and vulnerable communities in various parts of the world, and encourages the churches to reinforce their advocacy towards governments, NGOs, the scientific community and the business sector to intensify cooperation in response to global warming and climate change.¹

Today, God is still speaking, calling the earth from the rising sun to its setting. Indeed, we make bold to affirm that God is singing to creation, blessing each part to arise as it shines, and blessing the beauty of the earth.

It is a good creation. Our worship is a very good work. Our faith is bold to respond, here, now, in ever deepening ways that we share across settings for the love of one another with our God.

May our worship, our appreciation, our audacity to love, inspire us to action!

“God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.” — Gen. 1:31 NRSV

¹ World Council of Churches, “Minute on global warming and climate change,” Document GEN/PUB 05 (extract).

