

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ARE CENTRAL TO OUR THEOLOGY

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. (Psalm 24 v 1)

The Creator God, with infinite grace and bounty extends love to all the created order. Yet it is predicted that by the year 2030, 70% of the natural environment of that same world will have been destroyed. ⁱ ⁱⁱ The future of our planet is at stake. Global warming, depleting resources, deforestation, pollution, toxic and nuclear waste, the threat of war, poverty and the frequent homelessness inextricably linked with trans-national "development" and agribusiness are all powerful manifestations of this crisis. There is an urgent need for an encompassing, environmental awareness within the church.

As Christians we have more than just a civic or global obligation to respond to the escalating crises of environmental destruction. We believe that the whole of creation is the object of God's continuous, creative, loving and nurturing care. As followers of Christ, conscious of being part of that awesome and wonderful creation, we are called to treat all of creation, and all people, with the same loving, nurturing care and respect.

This calling requires a committed response to the "challenge to live responsibly and in harmony with the world" allowing the Biblical values of "justice, peace and the integrity of creation" ⁱⁱⁱ to reshape our life styles and our attitudes. We also believe in the Christian hope that the Holy Spirit will renew the whole creation, and that God will establish a new heaven and new earth.

Biblical references and imperatives to care for the environment go beyond the creation stories of Genesis 4 ^{iv} From Genesis to Revelation, allusions to the environment abound. ^{5v} Sadly, for historical reasons, ^{vi} those Biblical values of the integrity of creation (the Biblical concept of the wholeness of creation) have been somewhat distorted, often resulting in a physical and intellectual detachment from the natural world. This has led to a misconception that the earth is there solely for the use of humankind, and acquiescence to the concept that wealth and expansion are progress, whatever the physical or environmental cost. Thus, it could be argued that the church itself has contributed to the actual problem.

Rampant consumerism, global mass production, and the technology associated with political and economic power have the effect of dulling relationships with the rest of creation and we are spiritually the poorer as a result. Ironically, as the world has become smaller, so the connection between us and the rest of creation has become more tenuous, and the sanctity within creation has frequently been ignored. The environmental crisis goes hand in hand with a spiritual one.

The (re) discovery and understanding of the vital interconnection and interdependence of all of God's creation (i.e. the ecosystem) and the relationship of all creation with God, should deepen our commitment to restoring broken human relationships (local and global), our broken relationship with an increasingly desecrated and exploited environment and, of course, with our Creator.

A recognition of the place of the human race within creation, and an ensuing respect for how it sustains us, should infuse and colour our lives. This awareness of our

interconnectedness, and how our choices and actions impact on all of creation, should transform complacency, ignorance or guilt into a joyful, active and meaningful celebration of God-given life itself.

Conference (1990) received the recommendations of the Council's last statement on the environment and directed that it should be used as a study guide. This was duly produced at the time but is now no longer available. In its Mission Statement (1993) the Church stated that "God's creative purpose and active compassion inspire concern for the whole of human life and the environment" and committed itself to "the healing of broken persons, broken communities and an exploited environment".

Accordingly we urge all Irish Methodists to celebrate this God-given life by re-evaluating our personal lifestyles and engaging in a Church programme of environmental action, e.g. Eco -Congregation. (This programme has been ratified and promoted by CTBI.)

Environmental awareness should no longer be seen as an optional extra for a busy church, but should be an integral, practical expression of our loving and grateful relationship with God. We believe there is solid theology to support this.

We are convinced that the training and in-training of ordained and lay preachers, youth leaders and others should include vibrant, relevant material so that a positive message of wonder, respect and care for creation is imparted by them to those to whom they minister.

Finally we note the existence of the Earth Charter (www.earthcharter.org), which is an important and valuable statement and standard. While not written from a specifically Christian perspective, it is profoundly and deeply Christian in its approach.

REFERENCES

ⁱ The Global Environment Outlook, (UN Environment Programme 2000)

ⁱⁱ Did you know.....

- That each year 20,000 additional cases of cancer occur in the US because the average consumer is exposed to pesticide residues in nearly every food product?
- That the WHO has estimated that 25 million agricultural workers in developing countries (i.e. farmers producing fresh vegetables for our dinner tables) endure an incident of acute pesticide poisoning annually?
- That over 12 million children worldwide die each year from water related diseases?
- That air pollution causes 2.7 million deaths a year, with 80% of the victims in rural poor areas of developing countries?
- That every day the world wide economy burns an amount of energy that took the earth 27 years to process and store from the heat of the sun?
- That the average citizen in one of the world's 40 richest countries consumes 18 times as much commercial energy as a person in a low consumption country and causes a correspondingly greater degree of pollution?
- That seven of the hottest years on record occurred in the 1990s?
- That 4000 lakes in Sweden are biologically dead?

- That a child born in London or New York will consume, pollute and waste more in their lifetime than 50 children in a developing country, but it is the poorer children who are likely to die from air and water pollution.
- That globally 12 million hectares of indigenous forest are destroyed annually. One square mile of rainforest is destroyed every minute (its human and animal dwellers cleared out also). An area the size of Australia is cut down each year. At this rate all the remaining tropical forests will be destroyed by the year 2035. [Renewing the Face of the Earth, Dept. of Social Development and World Peace 1990; Beyond Poverty and Affluence, Goudzwaard and de Lange, Threshold 2000; Critical Issues and Spiritual Values for a global age, Gerald O Barney; The Global Environment Outlook, UN Environment Outlook 2000]

ⁱⁱⁱ World Council of Churches, Vancouver 1983.

^{iv} Gen 1; Gen 2

^v Gen 9 v 17; Exodus 23:10-11 & Lev:25 The health of the land was provided for by the laws for sabbatical years.

Lev 19:23-25 & Deut 20:19-20 Specific laws provided for the care of plants.

Deut 22:19-20 Animals were also to be cared for

Lev 26:14-45 the people were warned that failure to keep these laws would result in them being thrown out of the land.

The Pentateuch describes a covenant relationship that unites God, the people of Israel and the land. Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekial, Amos all portray a dynamic interrelationship between human society, the natural world and God. Job and the Psalms reflect on the great human imponderables of life, death, love, suffering and social existence. In these books nature is often used as an instrument through which wisdom is manifested and taught.

The Gospels where Jesus finds wisdom and solace in nature, confirming God's care for creation.

The Letters of Paul where several passages are set within a cosmic understanding of God's salvation in Christ e.g. Rom 8:18-23; 1Cor 15; Eph 1. Gospel of St. John and Revelation portray the purpose of God in salvation as including all creation

^{vi} Following the discovery that the world was indeed round, religious thinkers, theologians and philosophers withdrew from the arena of the scientific and physical world and concentrated on matters of the soul, ignoring and eventually robbing the earth of its mystery and sanctity. The advent of the industrial revolution and increasing scientific discovery encouraged mankind to assume it could control nature, to the extent that it was frequently believed that nature served no other purpose apart from that of humanity. Actual Biblical interpretation was carried out in a patriarchal, ecclesiastical context, where the narrow frame of reference was elitist and alien to most of contemporary society.