

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

THE RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

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LEADER'S GUIDE

1. Gathering

People coming to a group for the first time will often have some anxiety –

- ◆ Will I know anyone?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ Did I switch off the oven?
- ◆ It is important to help them through this first awkward stage. Have all your preparations done well beforehand so that you are able to greet each person warmly on arrival, introducing them to one another, and perhaps having tea and coffee available.

2. Beginning

- A. When all have arrived get the session started by giving them a clear statement of what the group is about -
Welcome the group
- ◆ who we are;
 - ◆ why we're here;
 - ◆ when we will finish.

It might go like this: "Welcome to my place, and I'm delighted that each of you has been able to make it. We are a group of people from Churches gathered together to reflect and share our ideas on ... (*name of study*). Tonight we will be looking at Study One

- B. Then invite the members to introduce themselves saying:
- ◆ who I am;
 - ◆ why I'm here;
 - ◆ what I hope to get out of the program.

Lead yourself by giving a short response to each of the three areas. Then invite each of the others to do likewise. Don't worry if some respond to only one or two of the areas.

- C. Then distribute copies of the program.

Encourage participants to listen to one another's ideas with respect.

3. Opening Devotion

- A. You may wish to play some music quietly in the background and give the group a few moments to reflect on the opening devotion. Then call for volunteers to lead it.
- B. You might like to choose an appropriate song for the group to share

4. Reflection on the Topic

Invite a couple of people to read the teaching. Encourage the readers to pause between each section.

5. Discussion

Allow a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions. Encourage participants to share responses to each question but there is to be no pressure put on anyone to speak. Be sure to make some response to each speaker if only to say e.g. "Thank you John". This makes sure the participant feels that he / she has been heard.

6. Closure

Thank the participants for their participation. Check to ensure venue is right for next session.

Closing Devotion

Cuppa

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**THE RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND
CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT
EVALUATION FORM**

The group leader invites the participants to complete the Evaluation Form at the end of the fourth study.

1. What did you appreciate about these studies?
2. What aspects of these studies did you find difficult?
3. What was the greatest challenge for you and your Church?
4. What topics would you like *Christians in Dialogue* to cover in future?

The Planning Committee invites the leader to respond to the two questions below.

1. Name of your group, each Church represented, and the number of people present from each denomination.
2. Generally speaking, how fully did participants enter into the discussion?

Thank you for your response.

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CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

THE RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

For much of history in the Christian era, the environment has often been taken for granted and at worst ruthlessly exploited. With the advent of modern industrialised society the exploitation has become quite destructive of the natural environment, resulting in significant ecological deterioration. This has been accompanied by an increasing awareness and concern for the ecology of the earth. Some commentators have blamed environmentally damaging human activities by Western nations, corporations and individuals on an interpretation of the Bible that claims it endorses unlimited exploitation of the earth by humans. See Genesis 1:28.

“Ecology” entered the English language as recently as 1873. It is the study of the interaction of life forms with each other and the environment. This interaction is a dynamic, not a static process, and is responsive to environmental changes. The history of the world before the advent of humans is one of continual change. The continents slowly drifted and collided at times. The mountains rose and were eroded away. Life commenced over a billion years ago. A number of major environmental catastrophes occurred – freezing of the entire surface of the earth, collisions with asteroids, massive volcanic clouds that blocked the sun. Each of these extinguished the bulk of life on earth at that time, but life bounced back with replacement of life forms that could not accommodate the changes with new, fitter life forms – the process of evolution. Ice ages came and went, moulding the landscape once more. At all times life evolved in response to changing environmental circumstances.

When humans came, they gradually became a dominant life form, and began to have their own impact on the environment. The mega fauna that existed tens of thousands of years ago (mastodons, cave bears etc) became extinct, possibly because of hunting by humans. Forests were cleared for agriculture. Overuse of land and changing weather patterns damaged the land and destroyed civilizations. Modern industrialisation, based on scientific discoveries, enabled populations to expand hugely, necessitating use of ever more land and resources. This had a dramatic impact on the environment, and in many places greatly disturbed ecological relationships. Complex communities were replaced by monocultures, deforestation and the extinction of plant and animal species accelerated.

This has led to questions such as:

Are these latest changes caused by humans just the latest phase of a divine plan for evolution of the earth, or is the ecological damage inflicted by humans contrary to God’s commands?

If an apocalyptic end of the earth may be imminent, as believed by some Christian groups, does this remove the need for environmental concern?

In this series of discussions it will be argued that caring for the environment is an integral part of Christian faith. Some modern theological approaches to environmental issues and official Church statements will be presented. It will be shown that the Bible text demonstrates great environmental sensitivity in terms of respect for and care of all creation and justice for all humanity. We will also discuss practical measures for Christians to become involved in this care. The major portion of each session is devoted to a discussion of the issues by participants, and active participation in this discussion is a key ingredient for success of the series.

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

First Session

HUMANS AND THE WEB OF LIFE

Pre-session Activities

- Think about your current state of understanding of the problems of the natural environment.
- Read Psalm 104, a song of praise for God the creator and provider, which has been described as “one of the four most important passages for a Christian environmentalism”.

Ecology and Theology

The science of ecology deals with the dynamic interactions of life forms with each other and the environment. This dynamism is driven by environmental changes, and results in changes on the distribution and evolution of life forms. As noted in the Introduction, some of these changes were catastrophic; extinguishing most species, but these catastrophes resulted in the evolution of new species, and led ultimately to humanity. Science places humans as one component of this “web of life” that is the outcome of ongoing creation that we see around us today. If we assume that the Bible is essentially about humans we receive a narrower message than one based on the whole of the earth as the focus of God’s concern. This concern with all creation is expressed beautifully in Psalm 104. Nonetheless, it must be said that from a biblical and theological point of view, God’s concern for all creation must be balanced by an understanding of the unique place of humans in the divine economy.

The theology of environmental responsibility (“Eco-theology”) is still developing, but the underlying thrust is to perceive science and theology as being in a new phase of partnership. It has been stated that “the sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show us how nature is to be understood as God’s creation”. Allied to this facet of theology is a move away from the Neoplatonic dualistic concept of the goodness of “spirit” and the evil of “matter”.

The Place of Humans in Creation

The place of humans in this web of life is unique. As noted in the introduction, they have gradually become a dominant life form, and by their activity have had a major impact on the environment. Throughout history this impact has increased in intensity and destructiveness, due to increase in population and resource use, but has accelerated greatly since the industrial revolution. It has been suggested that the uniqueness of humans in the web of life does not lie, however, in their dominance or the changes they have already produced, but in the fact that “we are, to our knowledge, the only creatures on the planet who *know* the common creation story, the only creatures who not only participate in it but *know* that they do”.

Christians and the Environment

Concern for the deteriorating environment has grown dramatically over the last fifty years, but is it reasonable to blame environmentally damaging human activities on a licence from the Bible for unlimited exploitation of the earth by humans? Development of a Christian eco-theology accompanied by an exposition of the extent of environmental damage caused by humans, and attempts to present an ecologically sensitive interpretation of the Bible were present early in the ecological awakening, although they were initially confined to a few voices. In 1961, at the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi, Joseph Sittler

stated “The care of the earth, the realm of nature as a theatre of grace, the ordering of the thick, material procedures that make available to or deprive men of bread and peace – these are Christological obediences before they are practical necessities”. In 1971, Pope Paul VI stated “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation”. The phrase “ecologically sustainable society” was first coined at the World Council of Churches meeting on “Science and Technology and Human Development” in 1974 at Bucharest. In spite of such early environmentally supportive statements, little positive action was initiated by the Christian community for some years. Since the 1980s, however, the Churches and theologians have been extremely active in developing eco-theology to harmonize modern Christian theology with the environmental concerns of today and the future.

Indigenous Peoples and the Environment

Christians can also gain from an understanding of the perspective of indigenous peoples towards the environment and our responsibility towards it. The 2008 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops stated: “Indigenous peoples have traditional understandings of the earth as a gift of the Creator and of their relationship to it and its creatures being one of interconnectedness and responsible caring. The Indigenous peoples have reminded us that we are not aliens in a wilderness to be conquered, but integral parts of the created order, as are plants and animals, which are to be cherished and nurtured”.

DISCUSSION (*Some suggested topics*)

- What do you think is encompassed by the term “eco-theology”?
- Do you detect a conflict between “ecologically sustainable society” and “economic growth”?
- Is it possible to argue for a profound unity of humans and the rest of the web of life and also argue for an important difference between human and other life?
- Have you felt to date that the only ecological message of the Bible is for humans to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (*Gen 1:28*)?
- Are Aboriginal attitudes towards the land relevant in today’s world, and if so, how and what may we learn from them?
- To what extent are we still held captive by the Greek philosophical notion of dualism that “spirit is good” and “matter is evil”?
- Do you know if your church has a similar statement to that of the Anglican Communion quoted above?

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

Second Session

TOWARDS AN ENVIRONMENTAL THEOLOGY

Pre-session Activities:

- The readings given below contain some of the important biblical passages specifically related to care of the environment as revealed in Scripture to the largely agrarian Israelites as they reflected upon creation and upon God's requirements for treatment of the land.

Read the scripture passages listed and consider whether they pick up the suggested themes of:

goodness of all creation (*Gen 1:11-13,20-25,31; Sir 16:26-29; 39:16-33; Wis 11:24-26*).

Creation belongs not to humans but to God (*Lev 25:23; Ps 24:1-2; 50:10-12; 94:4-5*); and is maintained by God (*Job 38-39; Ps 65:6-13; 104:1-32*).

God has established a covenant with all creation (*Gen 9:8-17; Ps 36:6*).

Humans have been given the responsibility to maintain creation responsibly, and not to exploit it (*Gen 1:26-30; Exod 23:10-12; Lev 19:9,23; 25:1-6; Deut 20:19-20; 2 Kings 19:23-28*). They will be punished if they abuse this responsibility (*Lev 26:32-35; 2 Chr 36:20-21*).

- In the first session, the term “*eco-theology*” was introduced. Search Google using this term to get a feeling for contemporary writings.

The Bible and Environmental Exploitation:

The above selection of pre-session readings from the Bible clearly establishes it as an environmentally sensitive document. Yet the Bible has been criticised as the source of the rationale for ruthless exploitation of the environment, most famously in 1967 by a historian, Professor Lynn White Jr., who said in a watershed essay entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”: “We shall have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for its existence save to serve man”. Unquestionably, early Christians not only destroyed images of pagan Gods, they also destroyed sacred groves and renamed pre-Christian sacred wells after saints in an attempt to destroy the competing animist religions with their guardian spirits. In White's hypothesis, this loss of a primarily spiritual protection of nature paved the way for adopting an objective approach to it, and consequently its unlimited exploitation by humans.

The use of strong words such as “dominion” in Genesis 1:26-28 and Psalm 8:5-8, and “fear and dread” in Genesis 9:2 would seem to justify this exploitation.

It cannot be denied that Western European technological dominance and exploitation occurred in a conspicuously Christian intellectual environment, and in some cases the forceful spread of Christianity was used as the rationale for this exploitation. Similarly, it cannot be denied that other activities now recognised to be the antithesis of the true message of the Bible (such as slavery and anti-Semitism) were supported in part by quoting individual Bible passages. Modern biblical exegesis has demonstrated the errors of such flawed interpretations. We should add the error of destructive exploitation resulting in environmental degradation to the list.

Eco-theology and the Bible:

Biblical interpretation: Genesis makes it clear that creation belongs to God, and that God has placed restrictions on human behaviour to avoid environmental abuses. In Genesis 2:15, Adam is ordered to “till and keep” the Garden of Eden. In Deuteronomy 20:19-20, the Israelites are forbidden from despoiling the countryside when at war. In Second Kings 19:23-28, God rebukes Sennacherib for his despoiling of Lebanon’s natural environment. In Exodus 23:10-12 and Leviticus 25:1-6, God commands that on the seventh day farm animals and slaves must be rested, and every seventh year the countryside of Israel must be rested to allow regeneration of the land – an early example of ecologically sustainable land usage. If the Israelites fail to adhere to the Sabbath, they are warned in Leviticus 26:27-35 that they will be punished and God will enforce the Sabbath to rest the land.

In Job 38-41, God mocks Job over his lack of understanding of creation and his inability to have dominion over it. In many places, scripture reaffirms that creation belongs to God, not humans (eg Leviticus 25:23). When God establishes the rainbow covenant after the flood, it repeatedly states that the covenant has been made with “every living creature” not just with humans (Genesis 9:8-17). It is clear that the mandate given by God is for use of the land and its resources in such a way as to sustain the whole of God’s creation.

Eco-theology and Modern Theologians:

Even a cursory look at the scope of entries in Google reveals that theological discussion of the environment has expanded dramatically in the last forty years. Different individuals have focussed on different themes, but there are some important themes emerging

- *All life has intrinsic value:* All created things derive their value from their creator, rather than their usefulness for humans. .
- *All beings are interconnected:* This concept expands our understanding from a simple dependence on the intervention of God for our continued survival to an interdependence of all members of the earth community. Humans have a role of stewardship or custodianship within this interconnectedness.

This includes a responsibility to avoid destructive exploitation. God’s covenant with us and God’s love of all life is the basis of this responsibility.

- *Human use of resources must be sustainable:* As opposed to fatalistic views which see the destruction of the earth as part of God’s plan, eco-theology emphasises sustainability for future existence. This includes ensuring the earth’s resources are not completely depleted, but that such use be considered in the context of sustainable development or sustainable sufficiency. The Levitical command (Lev 25: 1-12), for example, to allow a Sabbath rest is indicative of the desire to not overuse the earth’s resources.
- *Creation and grace are inter-related:* The very act of creation establishes that the whole of creation is a recipient of God’s grace.

In recognising the importance of the whole of creation, we must be careful not to elevate the status of nature beyond that of humanity, as a statement by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 cautioned: “But it should also be stressed that it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism – human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense” (*Caritas in Veritate* 48).

DISCUSSION (*Some suggested topics*)

- Do you agree with Professor Lynn White that the Christian doctrine of creation is largely responsible for the environmental crisis?
- Is all creation good? What about malaria and rats? Should we try to eliminate them?
- Psalm 8 describes humans as “a little lower than God” when affirming their dominion over animals. Should we maintain that God has made humans superior to animals? Do you agree with Pope Benedict’s statement on the status of nature?
- Is it legitimate to apply the Old Testament written over two thousand years ago for an agricultural people to today’s world?
- What is the role of humans in God’s covenant with creation?
- Discuss the ways in which a doctrine of grace helps us to understand our response in caring for creation.

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

Third session

JUSTICE FOR ALL CREATION

Pre-session Activities

The pre-session readings illustrate the Old and New Testament concern with justice for all humans and for all creation. There is emphasis on justice for humans in the New Testament, exemplified by the beatitudes, and the rich man and Lazarus. In the Old Testament there is a wider emphasis, not only on protection of the poor and powerless, but also the rest of creation.

- *Luke 1:52-53; 6:20-26; 16:19-31; Acts 2:44-47; 4:12-37.*
- *Gen 8:15-19; Exod 23:10,12,23; Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:10-22; 25:4; 1 Kings 21; Amos 8:4-10; Micah 2:1-3; 6:6-8.*

Justice for Humans:

The human environment is a major component of the total world environment, and the existence of poverty, with its attendant detrimental environmental effects, is directly associated with injustice: “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice” (*Prov 13:23*). The injustice of the rich in their dealings with the poor is strongly condemned in the Bible, and the rich who act unjustly are threatened with retribution from God. The Old Testament passages are directed particularly towards protecting the marginalised and powerless in the patriarchal, agrarian society of Israel – the widows, the small landholders, and the landless. The story of Ahab and Jezebel’s criminal procurement of Naboth’s vineyard, and God’s retribution on Ahab and his family (*1 Kings 21*) is a direct condemnation of the forced displacement of the poor from their ancestral land. In the New Testament, Jesus promises the kingdom of God to the poor. Paul is particularly harsh on the wealthy of the Corinthian community who do not share their food and drink with the poor at the Lord’s Supper (*1 Cor 11:17-33*). According to Acts, the early Christian community voluntarily pool their possessions and give to the needy (*Acts 2:44-47; 4:12-37*).

Throughout the Christian era there has always been a desire to remedy the unjust sufferings of the poor and powerless. The inequity of wealth distribution within a society and between rich and poor societies has a profound impact on degradation of both the human and the natural environment. This impact is likely to worsen as the world’s population increases beyond a sustainable level. The effect is twofold: 1. the excess demand of affluent nations and individuals for luxury goods has resulted in over-exploitation of the world’s resources - often located in poor countries.

For example, a desire for timber can lead to destruction of forests in some developing countries. 2. The desperation of the poor forces them to over-utilize these resources, resulting in their degradation. For much of the world’s population, possession of land for food production is their only protection against poverty and starvation, yet small landholdings are being taken over for agribusiness throughout the world. These problems will be discussed specifically in the next session.

Wars are a major cause of injustice and have been specifically condemned by Christian Churches both for their damage to the environment and to humans. Pope John Paul II said in his 1990 statement for the World Day of Peace “Today, any form of war on a global scale

would lead to incalculable ecological damage. But even local or regional wars, however limited, not only destroy human life and social structures, but also damage the land, ruining crops and vegetation as well as poisoning the soil and water. The survivors of war are forced to begin a new life in very difficult environmental conditions, which in turn create situations of extreme social unrest, with further negative consequences for the environment”.

Justice for Non-human Life:

The Old Testament demands justice for the whole of creation, including domestic and wild life. In addition to resting domestic animals every seventh day (*Exod 23:12*) and plants every seventh year (*Exod 23:10-11*), the Israelites were forbidden to muzzle an ox while it was treading out the grain (*Deut 25:4*). They were even forbidden the aesthetic injustice of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk (*Exod 23:23*). In the case of wild animals, in Sirach it is stated “the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing” (*Sir 18:13*). The absence of control of humans over nature is expressed most extensively in Job 38-40 and in Psalm 104.

Recent Church Statements on Just Use of the Earth’s Resources:

The Churches have generally followed the biblical principles of a preferential option for the poor, and that poorer nations and individuals should have just access to the earth’s resources. As a consequence of this primary concern with justice and an increasing Christian involvement in protection of the environment, the Churches have always emphasised the need for justice in the human environment as part of their total response to environmental concerns. This can be seen, for instance, in many of recent formal statements, for example:

- *Pope Benedict XVI’s Message for the 2010 World Day of Peace: “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect the Environment”* in which he states “Natural resources should be used in such a way that immediate benefits do not have a negative impact on living creatures, human and not, present and future; that the protection of private property does not conflict with the universal destination of goods; that human activity does not compromise the fruitfulness of the earth, for the benefit of people now and in the future”.
- *1988 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops: Resolution 40* states: “This Conference identifies four interrelated areas in which the misuse of people or resources poses a threat to the life system of the planet, namely (a) unjust distribution of the world’s wealth, (b) social injustice within nations, (c) the rise of militarism, (d) irreversible damage to the environment”. The Conference reaffirmed that “the divine Spirit is sacramentally present in Creation, which is therefore to be treated with reverence, respect, and gratitude”. It further recognised that “the future of human beings and all life on earth hangs in balance as a consequence of the present unjust economic structures, the injustice between rich and poor, the continuing exploitation of the natural environment and the threat of nuclear destruction”.

DISCUSSION (*Some suggested topics*)

- Groups of powerless who have been unjustly exploited are the indigenous peoples in many countries. What should be the Christian response to the unjust and often destructive exploitation by non-indigenous developers of indigenous assets? Do you agree with comments by Noel Pearson and others that indigenous people must be given the opportunity to play a more responsible role in their own development?
- In developing and developed countries, the “family farm” is under increasing pressure to “get big or get out”. Should small landholders be protected legally? What role should Churches have?

- What do you think might be implied by the statement: “to be sustainable, human economies must be understood as subsystems of the earth environment”?
- What should be the role of labour unions in protection of the poor?
- In the past, missionary activity has used economic inducements to achieve conversion to Christianity. What is a desirable code of conduct for missionary activity in developing nations?

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

Fourth Session

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF HUMAN ACTIVITIES

Pre-session Activities:

Read the text of “A Discussion Paper on Population Issues” prepared in 2010 by the Public Affairs Commission of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. It is a comprehensive document of 19 pages available on the internet at <http://www.anglican.org.au> and search under “population”. You may also like to look up Lynn White’s important 1967 article in Science “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”. It is available on the internet at <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm>, and is eight pages long.

The Biblical Picture

A significant problem caused by human civilization has been the overuse of resources, with their subsequent degradation. Even though the population was relatively small, the effect on agriculture was obvious in biblical times. Mosaic Law required the land to lie fallow every seventh year (*Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7*) so that regeneration could occur. War also had an adverse environmental effect. The Israelites were forbidden to cut down fruit trees for siege works when besieging a town (*Deut 20:19-20*). Sennacherib was punished for felling the cedars of Lebanon (*2 Kings 19:23-28*).

The New Testament writers tended towards an apocalyptic resolution of the world’s ills with creation of a new earth (eg *2 Pet 3:3-13*) and divine retribution on “those who destroy the earth” (*Rev 11:18*).

The Broad Contemporary Picture

The industrial revolution resulted in a huge population increase, and an even greater increase in the range and the amount of natural resources used by humans. As in biblical times, non-sustainable agricultural practices and wars remained major contributors to environmental degradation. Deforestation accelerated. Indigenous human, animal and plant populations were ravaged by diseases and pests introduced from other countries. Waste disposal became a problem, and consequently pollution of land, sea and air joined the overuse of resources as a major contributor to environmental degradation. Remedial action to prevent or at least limit environmental damage has often been delayed and/or inadequate because solutions are seen as costly. In addition, the rich and powerful have the resources to avoid the detrimental effects of environmental damage, so that the burden falls largely on the poor and powerless. The adverse effects of modern warfare have escalated immensely with the deployment of weapons of mass destruction, so that humans now have the capacity to destroy much of life. Increased scientific understanding and rising environmental awareness by the public have led to the acceptance that human activities have been a major factor in causing the substantial and undesirable degradation of the environment sketched above.

In the twenty-first century, the major driving factors for non-sustainable increase in resource usage are population growth and increased *per capita* consumption. The demand for resources is aggravated by the great disparity in the latter between the affluent “first world” (who can afford to pay for resources) and the more populous, poor “third world” (who are seriously under-resourced). To meet the demands of justice and equity, the “third world” needs to be able to build resources (e.g. electricity power plants) without a major decrease in quality of life in the “first world”.

The Broad Response

To prevent further environmental deterioration, there is need for improvement in resource management and protection of environmental quality, supported by an understanding of the full consequences of human activities and enlightened political leadership. Life sustaining enterprises such as large scale agriculture, energy and industrial production cannot be abandoned, and the increasing world population will require increased outputs from them. Specific areas for protection and repair include:

- *Biodiversity:* All life forms play a role, often unexpected, in an ecological community, so maintenance of biodiversity is essential for the health of that community. An increased land use for farming and expansion of cities and an increasing intensity of impact of human activities on the environment place pressure on the most vulnerable life forms for survival. Loss of habitat, predation by feral animals, invasion by feral plants, and industrial and agricultural pollution are some of the detrimental factors involved here. Forests, particularly tropical rain forests, are major sites of biodiversity. They are being cleared at an unprecedented rate with loss of many plant and animal species, some of which are still unknown to science.
- *Water:* Australia is the driest of the inhabited continents and the increasing demands of population and agriculture have led to over-commitment of water allocation for irrigation and increasing salination. In the oceans, there is pollution by agricultural waste runoff, oil and other spills, and introduction from overseas of invasive sea life by ships. Increasing acidity due to increasing dissolved carbon dioxide from the atmosphere may have a significant adverse effect on organisms with calcium salts in their skeletons such as corals.
- *Land:* Loss of rural land has occurred through encroachment by cities and mining. Natural causes include desertification and salination. Excessive soil erosion caused by poor agricultural practices causes further loss of land by degradation. Loss of natural habitats causes loss of biodiversity.
- *Waste:* The huge amounts of waste produced by humans occupy space, may cause chemical or biological pollution, and, if not recycled, cause increased requirements for resources to replace the waste materials.
- *Energy Production:* Prosperity in our crowded world depends on the availability of large amounts of cheap energy. Many countries are attempting to reduce their reliance on carbon-based fuels in order to limit the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and so reduce the extent of global warming. This cannot be done without increasing the cost of energy, which would have an adverse effect on the attempts of third world countries to improve their standard of living. On the other hand, continued increasing world temperatures would result in inundation of land near sea level, with displacement of millions of people, particularly in third world countries.

DISCUSSION (*Some suggested topics*)

- Do you have any experience of species change or possible extinction in locations you have experienced?
- How is justice for the third world compatible with sustainable development of the world's resources?

- The 1988 Lambeth Conference gives recognition to the fact that “the loss of natural habitats is a direct cause of genocide amongst millions of indigenous peoples and is causing the extinction of thousands of plant and animal species”. Please discuss and add your knowledge to this statement
- What is the role of human overpopulation in causing environmental damage?
- How should action to limit environmental damage and restore already damaged systems be paid for?

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

Fifth Session

FROM ECO-THEOLOGY TO ECO-MISSION

Pre-session Activities

- Look up some or all of the web sites for the church eco-mission structures given below or do your own independent Google search to find stories of Churches that have successfully engaged in ecological mission.
- Reflect on your personal activity to help the environment.

Eco-mission

The mission of the Church is rooted in its theology, and so the early sessions of this study of Christians and the Environment have been devoted to establishing the bible-based existence of an eco-theology and establishing its salient features. In this session we now make the connection between the theology of environmental responsibility to the implementation of actions based on this theology, that is, a Christian response to God's demands for humans to protect creation. We call this the progress from eco-theology to eco-mission. For the future of creation, it is essential that eco-mission is regarded as an integral part of the Christian mission generally, and for it to be undertaken deliberately and intentionally, as evidenced in the formulation and acceptance of an Eco-Mission Statement. In 1984, the Anglican Communion adopted "Five Marks of Mission". The fourth and fifth are relevant for eco-mission:

- To seek to transform the unjust structures of society.
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

We can look at eco-mission from two perspectives – the response of Christian Churches and the response of Christian individuals.

Eco-mission by Churches

Structures have been set up by the World Council of Churches, the Catholic Church, and other individual Churches. These may be general, regional or local. Some links are:

- *Catholic Church*: Catholic Earthcare Australia (www.catholicearthcare.org.au)
- *Anglican Church*: AngliGreen, Diocese of Brisbane Environment Group (<http://angligreen.org.au>)
- *Uniting Church*: Queensland Green Church (Queensland: <http://greenchurch.ucaqld.com.au>)

Proposals for an ecumenical eco-mission network at state and national level in Australia are current. The rationale behind these proposals may be stated as follows:

Given the current ecological crisis, there is an urgent need for the Churches to address publicly the ethical, social and spiritual questions posed by this crisis. There is also a growing awareness that the Church has a mission to love and care for God's creation as a vital expression of its faith (this is our definition of Eco-Mission). In this context, it is time to establish a network that will enable a plan of action to facilitate

this mission; this would enable the Churches together to make their unique voice and position heard on ecological matters.

Eco-mission by Local Church Communities and Individuals

There are many stories of local action both from within Australia and from overseas, and while they may need to be adapted to suit local conditions, they may nevertheless provide inspiration.

After the adoption of an Eco-Mission statement, a good starting point may be an environmental or energy audit. Resources for this are available. Other possibilities follow: the instillation of solar power, a rainwater tank, a meditative garden, mulching, a community garden, and much more. One congregation developed a cordless electric “eco-mower”, while another had a 170,000 litre underground water tank, plus an evaporating system that is more power efficient than reverse cycle air conditioning.

Worship is a fundamental building block of the Church’s very existence, and it is imperative therefore that God’s creation is included in appropriate ways and times. This may happen in a number of ways. First, worship leaders and preachers may be aware of environmental implications of events and activities on a week by week basis. Second, many have found “Time of Creation” at the start of September (initiated in 1989 by the late Orthodox Patriarch Demetrios I) to be a valuable resource and approach. (See www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageid=408) An important ecumenical Australian resource for worship is ‘Season of Creation,’ www.seasonofcreation.com

It is important in addressing eco-mission themes to find a balance between local and global issues. Congregations will need to engage with local environmental issues, while the global situation is so large that the best one can hope to do is grasp “the near edge” of it. But eco-mission invariably reflects several contexts simultaneously; if it begins locally, it must also take account of the regional, national, and global situation.

The experience of some Churches has been that the commitment of a local congregation to eco-mission has directly encouraged personal environmental action on the part of its members. While personal action alone will not be enough to save the planet, it is still a part of the process and there are many possibilities. David Suzuki has argued that while the size of the global population is a major problem, excessive consumption on a local level is an even bigger problem.

We might be shocked if we measured our environmental footprint (use of fuel, electricity, creation of waste)! Can we reduce our consumption – or “tread the earth lightly”? How can we make our homes more environmentally friendly? How can we reduce our fuel consumption? Possibilities for eco-friendliness include solar photo-voltaic cells, solar hot water, reflective paint on the roof, quality insulation, a vegetable and/or native garden, using public transport, walking, or cycling. See websites mentioned above for further examples.

DISCUSSION *(Some suggested topics)*

- How can we encourage a stronger link between theology and mission, and consciously adopt a theology of eco-mission?
- Are there ways our churches can work together in this area?
- What are the possibilities and the risks for Churches to engage with political processes on behalf of the environment?

- Discuss the Anglican Church's fourth and fifth Marks of Mission in relation to the call for local congregations to adopt an Eco-Mission Statement.
- Consider the possibilities for ecumenical environmental action in your area.
- Share ideas about ways and means of living a more eco-friendly personal lifestyle.