



*An Urgent
Role for the
Church*

ENVIRONMENTAL

Leadership

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As the paper was dropping into the trashcan, I grabbed it back and tossed it in the recycle bin; I am having to retrain myself! I was not taught to recycle growing up. In fact, the majority of us in the U.S. were not taught to recycle.

But, is it really necessary to create an awareness and retrain ourselves to think of recycling? After all, recycling is—pardon the pun—just a drop in the bucket. Too often, we stop with only recycling and do not look deeper into the underlying issues involved in our environmental problems. If we are to get to the root of the problem, we must create an awareness of the deeper issues of consumerism, economics, and ultimately a renewed search for identity and meaning. In this article, we intend to argue that the Church has a crucial leadership role to play in American society, if we are to suc-

cessfully address the environmental challenges that confront us.

Over the past 200 years, human creativity and ingenuity have made extraordinary progress in developing new and powerful technologies. These technological advancements allow humans to shape and mold the environment, while simultaneously enabling us to separate ourselves hermetically from many of the troublesome difficulties caused by nature. Unfortunately, we have collectively mismanaged these powerful technologies creating a number of serious ecological crises as we move into the Twenty-first century.

These ecological crises are both local and global in scope. On the local level, for example, a serious ecological crisis is disposing of all the garbage that we create. Americans produce over 160 million tons of garbage per year, enough garbage to fill a bumper-to-bumper convoy of garbage trucks halfway to the moon. Thus, all recycling—even a single sheet of paper—becomes important for the long-term future of our planet.

Climate change is an important example of global ecological crises. In the industrialized world, we are heavily dependent upon burning fossil fuels to supply the energy requirements of our highly technological society. While there are a

few dissenting opinions, the vast majority of scientific specialists, including the prestigious International Panel on Climate Change, hold that heavy reliance on fossil fuels for energy is warming the atmosphere and changing the earth's climate. The consequences for changing the earth's climate are, without exaggeration, cataclysmic.

TWO ROOT CAUSES

Although all of the environmental problems confronting us are complex and inter connected, they share two fundamental root causes. The first is rapid population growth in less developed countries. There is compelling evidence from the social sciences that rapid population growth in the relatively poor areas of the world is directly correlated to poverty, hunger, poor sanitation, and high unemployment. In other words, profound issues of economic justice contribute to this root cause of environmental problems.

Related to the first root cause of environmental problems is a second cause: overconsumption in the developed nations, especially in the United States. An infant born in middle-class America today will—by the time he or she celebrates their 18th birthday—have consumed the same amount of natural

resources as 200 infants born in the less developed world on the same day. That is more than extravagant consumption. Yet, a shallow materialism literally has a death grip on American culture. Our lives are permeated by a commercialization that encourages us to define ourselves in terms of what clothes we wear, what car we drive, what deodorant and mouth wash we use. Julia Esquivel, the Guatemalan poet, has described this commercialization as an “absurd frenzy to accumulate more and more things even when that causes more and more suffering.”¹

Undergirding this extravagant materialism is a vision of what counts as a good, satisfying and fulfilled life. Sociologist Robert Bellah calls this vision, “utilitarian individualism.”² According to Bellah, this vision of the good life centers rather narrowly on individual acquisition of material goods and the experience of consuming. In other words, this outlook on life strives for more and more consumption as the crucial key to a satisfying, fulfilled life. Inevitably, this leads to overconsumption and serious ecological problems.

It is here that we believe the Church has a crucial leadership role to play in American culture. Christian faith is deeply at odds with the prevailing outlook of utilitarian individualism. On the contrary, the Christian vision for the good life centers on love of other humans as well as nature; a passion for justice; spiritual growth and fulfillment; and an emphasis on community. American philosopher Max Oelschlaeger has written: “One reason that amelioration of environmental crisis eludes us is that religion has a fundamental role to play in environmentalism, a function that nothing else can fulfill.”³ For Oelschlaeger, religion has a pivotal leadership role because it alone has the resources to construct an alternative vision for what counts as the good, fulfilled, satisfying life. This is especially true for the Church because Christianity is the most prevalent religion in the United States.

While there are important exceptions, generally speaking the Church has failed to step forward and assume the mantle of environmental leadership in the U.S. We believe that it is time for the Church to pick up this mantle—with a sense of urgency. We believe that this leadership

must grow out of local congregations and be based on scriptural foundations. An overall ministry plan might include the following six emphases:

- 1) *Developing a scientific understanding of environmental crises and their consequences*
- 2) *Developing an understanding of how economic systems impact the environmental issues and what those basic issues include*
- 3) *Creating an appreciation for what drives our overconsumption*
- 4) *Helping church members to construct their own alternative vision for the good and fulfilling life*
- 5) *Developing an understanding of Christian love and community that includes all of creation and informs our identity as stewards of creation; and*
- 6) *Identifying resources to integrate Christian life with everyday practice of environmental stewardship.*

We believe that three dimensions of parish ministry may be especially important in helping the church provide environmental leadership:

PREACHING

Preaching that provides environmental leadership helps the congregation construct a new vision of the good life that leads away from individualism and consumption as the answer to our happiness and fulfillment. Sermons that show alternative examples of the good life, found through Christian love in community, can help Christians envision new ways to live and find meaning in their lives. These sermons will strive to create an understanding of identity as Christians connected to purpose and meaning of life through the biblical concepts of community in the image of God as seen in Jesus Christ, and the concept of stewardship with attention to the

household of God, Sabbath, and holy living. When we have preached explicitly on environmental themes, some of the scripture texts we have preached from have included Matthew 22:34-40, I Corinthians 12, Genesis 1, and Luke 16:19-31.

TEACHING

We are excited about a new curriculum resource for congregations, just out from

Religion has a pivotal leadership role because it alone has the resources to construct an alternative vision for what counts as the good, fulfilled, satisfying life.

- **Mary Elizabeth Moore**
Ministering with the Earth
(St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998). An excellent resource for thinking about how to implement and then develop environmental ministries in the church.
- **Rodney Clapp**
The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture
(Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998). A collection of articles that are an excellent source of information, including statistical information, concerning the drive to consume, and how that affects our identity as Christians.
- **Tony Campolo and Gordon Aeschliman**
50 Ways You Can Help Save the Planet
(Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992). A source book for “hands-on” ways to initiate concrete action.
- **Bruce Birch and Charles R. Foster**
Steward: Living as Disciples in Everyday Life
(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). A new 12-week study for congregations to explore how to be stewards of what God has given to us in the many different areas of our lives. This would be an excellent study to first engage people in a conversation on care of our environment.
- **James A. Nash**
Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility
(Abingdon Press, 1991). A major contribution to Christian environmental ethics.
- **www.epa.gov/hhiptool**
This website, created by the Environmental Protection Agency, will help you conduct a customized energy audit on a home or church.

Abingdon Press, called: *Steward: Living as Disciples in Everyday Life* by Bruce Birch and Charles R. Foster. This study combines a place for discussion with scriptural resourcing to help participants find identity as stewards in the different places of our every day lives. Churches may also design a program to meet their own unique needs.

Before this new curriculum, one of us (Sherry Habben) developed her own five-week study series with sessions on:

- **Environmental Basics: including statistics, carrying capacity of the earth, natural capital and our economic worldview**
- **Economic issues versus Environmental Care: exploring our ideas of progress as it effects environmental care, how to value natural resources, information on local issues to create awareness**
- **Consumption: focusing on how and what we consume, what our consumption does to the environment, why we overconsume, what counts as the "abundant life"**
- **Controlling Consumption: including finding a time and place to come together to discuss the issues, "household of God" economics, Sabbath, Jubilee, and holy living**
- **Resources and Possibilities: for taking action in the community and in making the home and family active in environmental issues.**

CHURCH ADMINISTRATION

As congregations develop a genuine appreciation for the ecological threats under which we live, we would recommend the formation of a church *Environmental Task Force* to address issues in the church and community. There are

often people in our congregations that work in environmental industries, community action groups, or school environmental clubs that could provide valuable resources. All age groups should be included to make this an intergenerational resource group, as many of our young people are already engaged in school and community groups. The role of the task force is to find and utilize these resources in taking action within the church and community—building a bridge that connects our Christian identity as steward with how we live our lives in the world.

The heart of the environmental issue is a theological one that needs to be addressed by the church in creating an environmental ethic, based on a scriptural foundation, that leads to identity and responsibility as Christian stewards in the world. Only as we help people find this new identity will the root issues of our environmental situation begin to surface. As people begin to see another vision of a good, fulfilled, and satisfying life—a life based on love of God and neighbor, including all of creation—the potential for change becomes apparent. A transformed identity can lead to different lifestyles, a call for justice, and a care for our environment that provides meaning and satisfaction. The church's role is a vital one in creating a place for genuine discussion that results in awareness, education, and resourcing that leads beyond recycling to healing the relationship with our environment and finding our purpose in life. □

Notes

¹ Julia Esquivel, Lecture to students enrolled in Saint Paul School of Theology, Course IM348, Guatemala City, Guatemala, 14 January 2001.

² Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 32-35.

³ Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation, An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 185.



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