



## **National Council of Churches**

### **Theological Statement on the Environment**

#### **God's Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States**

God's creation delivers unsettling news. Earth's climate is warming to dangerous levels; 90 percent of the world's fisheries have been depleted; coastal development and pollution are causing a sharp decline in ocean health; shrinking habitat threatens to extinguish thousands of species; over 95 percent of the contiguous United States forests have been lost; and almost half of the population in the United States lives in areas that do not meet national air quality standards. In recent years, the profound danger has grown, requiring us as theologians, pastors, and religious leaders to speak out and act with new urgency.

We are obliged to relate to Earth as God's creation "in ways that sustain life on the planet, provide for the [basic] needs of all humankind, and increase justice."<sup>1</sup> Over the past several decades, slowly but faithfully, the religious community in the United States has attempted to address issues of ecology and justice. Our faith groups have offered rich theological perspectives, considered moral issues through the lens of long-standing social teaching, and passed numerous policies within our own church bodies. While we honor the efforts in our churches, we have clearly failed to communicate the full measure and magnitude of Earth's environmental crisis—religiously, morally, or politically. It is painfully clear from the verifiable testimony of the world's scientists that our response has been inadequate to the scale and pace of Earth's degradation.

To continue to walk the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly; it is sin. As voiced by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who has taken the lead among senior religious leaders in his concern for creation: "To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation . . . for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands . . . for humans to injure other humans with disease . . . for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances . . . these are sins."<sup>2</sup> We have become un-Creators. Earth is in jeopardy at our hands.

This means that ours is a theological crisis as well. We have listened to a false gospel that we continue to live out in our daily habits—a gospel that proclaims that God cares for the salvation of humans only and that our human calling is to exploit Earth for our own ends alone. This false gospel still finds its proud preachers and continues to capture its adherents among emboldened political leaders and policy makers.

The secular counterpart of this gospel rests in the conviction that humans can master the Earth. Our modern way of life assumes this mastery. However, the sobering truth is that we hardly have knowledge of, much less control over, the deep and long-term consequences of our human impacts upon the Earth. We have already sown the seeds for many of those consequences. The fruit of those seeds will be reaped by future generations of human beings, together with others in the community of life.

The imperative first step is to repent of our sins, in the presence of God and one another. This repentance of our social and ecological sins will acknowledge the special responsibility that falls to those of us who are citizens of the United States. Though only five percent of the planet's human population, we produce one-quarter of the world's carbon emissions, consume a quarter of its natural riches, and perpetuate scandalous inequities at home and abroad. We are a precious part of Earth's web of life, but we do not own the planet and we cannot transcend its requirements for regeneration on its own terms. We have not listened well to the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

The second step is to pursue a new journey together, with courage and joy. By God's grace, all things are made new. We can share in that renewal by clinging to God's trustworthy promise to restore and fulfill all that God creates and by walking, with God's help, a path different from our present course. To that end, we affirm our faith, propose a set of guiding norms, and call on our churches to rededicate themselves to this mission. We firmly believe that addressing the degradation of God's sacred Earth is *the* moral assignment of our time comparable to the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, the worldwide movement to achieve equality for women, or ongoing efforts to control weapons of mass destruction in a post-Hiroshima world.

### **Ecological Affirmations of Faith**

We stand with awe and gratitude as members of God's bountiful and good creation. We rejoice in the splendor and mystery of countless species, our common creaturehood, and the interdependence of all that God makes. We believe that the Earth is home for all and that it has been created intrinsically good (Genesis 1).

We lament that the human species is shattering the splendid gifts of this web of life, ignoring our responsibility for the well being of all life, while destroying species and their habitats at a rate never before known in human history.

We believe that the Holy Spirit, who animates all of creation, breathes in us and can empower us to participate in working toward the flourishing of Earth's community of life. We believe that the people of God are called to forge ways of being human that enable socially just and ecologically sustainable communities to flourish for generations to come. And we believe in God's promise to fulfill all of creation, anticipating the reconciliation of all (Colossians 1:15), in accordance with God's promise (II Peter 3:13).

We lament that we have rejected this vocation, and have distorted our God-given abilities and knowledge in order to ransack and often destroy ecosystems and human communities rather than to protect, strengthen, and nourish them.

We believe that, in boundless love that hungers for justice, God in Jesus Christ acts to restore and redeem all creation (including human beings). God incarnate affirms all creation (John 1:14), which becomes a sacred window to eternity. In the cross and resurrection we know that God is drawn into life's most brutal and broken places and there brings forth healing and liberating power. That saving action restores right relationships among all members of "the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

We confess that instead of living and proclaiming this salvation through our very lives and worship, we have abused and exploited the Earth and people on the margins of power and privilege, altering climates,

extinguishing species, and jeopardizing Earth's capacity to sustain life as we know and love it.

We believe that the created world is sacred—a revelation of God's power and gracious presence filling all things. This sacred quality of creation demands moderation and sharing, urgent antidotes for our excess in consumption and waste, reminding us that economic justice is an essential condition of ecological integrity. We cling to God's trustworthy promise to restore, renew, and fulfill all that God creates. We long for and work toward the day when churches, as embodiments of Christ on Earth, will respond to the "groaning of creation" (Romans 8:22) and to God's passionate desire to "renew the face of the Earth" (Psalm 104:30). We look forward to the day when the lamentations and groans of creation will be over, justice with peace will reign, humankind will nurture not betray the Earth, and all of creation will sing for joy.

### **Guiding Norms for Church and Society**

These affirmations imply a challenge that is also a calling: to fulfill our vocation as moral images of God, reflections of divine love and justice charged to "serve and preserve" the Garden (Genesis 2:15). Given this charge and the urgent problems of our age—from species extinctions and mass poverty to climate change and health-crippling pollution—how shall we respond? What shall we be and do? What are the standards and practices of moral excellence that we ought to cultivate in our personal lives, our communities of faith, our social organizations, our businesses, and our political institutions? We affirm the following norms of social and environmental responsibility:

**Justice**—creating right relationships, both social and ecological, to ensure for all members of the Earth community the conditions required for their flourishing. Among human members, justice demands meeting the essential material needs and conditions for human dignity and social participation. In our global context, economic deprivation and ecological degradation are linked in a vicious cycle. We are compelled, therefore, to seek eco-justice, the integration of social justice and ecological integrity. The quest for eco-justice also implies the development of a set of human environmental rights, since one of the essential conditions of human well being is ecological integrity. These moral entitlements include protection of soils, air, and water from diverse pollutants; the preservation of biodiversity; and governmental actions ensuring the fair and frugal use of creation's riches.

**Sustainability**—living within the bounds of planetary capacities indefinitely, in fairness to both present and future generations of life. God's covenant is with humanity and all other living creatures "for all future generations" (Genesis 9:8-17). The concern for sustainability forces us to be responsible for the truly long-term impacts of our lifestyles and policies.

**Bioresponsibility**—extending the covenant of justice to include all other life forms as beloved creatures of God and as expressions of God's presence, wisdom, power, and glory. We do not determine nor declare creation's value, and other creatures should not be treated merely as instruments for our needs and wants. Other species have their own integrity. They deserve a "fair share" of Earth's bounty—a share that allows a biodiversity of life to thrive along with human communities.

**Humility**—recognizing, as an antidote to arrogance, the limits of human knowledge, technological ingenuity, and moral character. We are not the masters of creation. Knowing human capacities for error and evil, humility keeps our own species in check for the good of the whole of Earth as God's creation.

**Generosity**—sharing Earth’s riches to promote and defend the common good in recognition of God’s purposes for the whole creation and Christ’s gift of abundant life. Humans are not collections of isolated individuals, but rather communities of socially and ecologically interdependent beings. A measure of a good society is not whether it privileges those who already have much, but rather whether it privileges the most vulnerable members of creation. Essentially, these tasks require good government at all levels, from local to regional to national to international.

**Frugality**—restraining economic production and consumption for the sake of eco-justice. Living lives filled with God’s Spirit liberates us from the illusion of finding wholeness in the accumulation of material things and brings us to the reality of God’s just purposes. Frugality connotes moderation, sufficiency, and temperance. Many call it simplicity. It demands the careful conservation of Earth’s riches, comprehensive recycling, minimal harm to other species, material efficiency and the elimination of waste, and product durability. Frugality is the corrective to a cardinal vice of the age: prodigality – excessively taking from and wasting God’s creation. On a finite planet, frugality is an expression of love and an instrument for justice and sustainability: it enables all life to thrive together by sparing and sharing global goods.

**Solidarity**—acknowledging that we are increasingly bound together as a global community in which we bear responsibility for one another’s well being. The social and environmental problems of the age must be addressed with cooperative action at all levels—local, regional, national and international. Solidarity is a commitment to the global common good through international cooperation.

**Compassion**—sharing the joys and sufferings of all Earth’s members and making them our own. Members of the body of Christ see the face of Christ in the vulnerable and excluded. From compassion flows inclusive caring and careful service to meet the needs of others.

### **A Call to Action: Healing the Earth and Providing a Just and Sustainable Society**

For too long, we, our Christian brothers and sisters, and many people of good will have relegated care and justice for the Earth to the periphery of our concerns. This is *not* a competing “program alternative,” one “issue” among many. In this most critical moment in Earth’s history, we are convinced that *the central moral imperative* of our time is the care for Earth as God’s creation.

Churches, as communities of God’s people in the world, are called to exist as representatives of the loving Creator, Sustainer, and Restorer of all creation. We are called to worship God with all our being and actions, and to treat creation as sacred. We must engage our political leaders in supporting the very future of this planet. We are called to cling to the true Gospel – for “God so loved the cosmos” (John 3:16) – rejecting the false gospels of our day.

We believe that caring for creation must undergird, and be entwined with, all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries. We are convinced that it is no longer acceptable to claim to be “church” while continuing to perpetuate, or even permit, the abuse of Earth as God’s creation. Nor is it acceptable for our corporate and political leaders to engage in “business as usual” as if the very future of life-support systems were not at stake.

Therefore, we urgently call on our brothers and sisters in Christ, and all people of good will, to join us in:

**Understanding** our responsibilities as those who live within the United States of America – the part of the human family that represents five percent of the world population and consumes 25 percent of Earth’s

riches. We believe that one of the surest ways to gain this understanding is by listening intently to the most vulnerable: those who most immediately suffer the consequences of our overconsumption, toxication, and hubris. The whole Earth is groaning, crying out for healing—let us awaken the “ears of our souls” to hear it, before it’s too late.

**Integrating** this understanding into our core beliefs and practices surrounding what it means to be “church,” to be “human,” to be “children of God.” Such integration will be readily apparent in: congregational mission statements, lay and ordained ministries, the preaching of the Word, our hymns of praise, the confession of our sins, our financial stewardship and offerings to God, theological education, our evangelism, our daily work, sanctuary use, and compassionate service to all communities of life. With this integrated witness we look forward to a revitalization of our human vocation and our churches’ lives that parallels the revitalization of God’s thriving Earth.

**Advocating** boldly with all our leaders on behalf of creation’s most vulnerable members (including human members). We must shed our complacency, denial, and fears and speak God’s truth to power, on behalf of all who have been denied dignity and for the sake of all voiceless members of the community of life.

In Christ’s name and for Christ’s glory, we call out with broken yet hopeful hearts: join us in restoring God’s Earth—the greatest healing work and moral assignment of our time.

Signed,

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American Baptist *Policy Statement on Ecology*, 1989, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>“Address of His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, 8 November 1997,” John Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, pages 220-221.

The Theological Statement on the Environment was drafted in September 2004 at the College of Preachers and finalized February 2005. For information on how you, your congregation, faith group, judicatory, or denomination can affirm this statement visit [www.ncccojustice.org](http://www.ncccojustice.org) or contact Cassandra Carmichael, eco-justice program director, National Council of Churches, 110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Suite 108, Washington, DC 20002; 202-544-2350 ext. 27; or [cassandra@toad.net](mailto:cassandra@toad.net).