

To Serve Christ in All Creation

A Pastoral Letter from the Episcopal Bishops of New England

In thanksgiving for the gift of God's creation and with an urgent concern for the health and stewardship of the world, we your bishops issue this Pastoral Letter on the Environment. We know that the environmental crisis is a matter of great concern to many Episcopalians and we know that many of you have acted more fully and more faithfully than we ourselves have. We confess our past complacency, ignorance and neglect. We regret Christian teachings that claim or imply that human beings have divine sanction to destroy God's creation. We pledge our prayers, our time, our leadership and our energies to the work that needs to be done. We encourage all members of the Episcopal Church in New England to see in the promises of the Baptismal Covenant the call to serve Christ in all creation.

Scripture and tradition remind us that the whole earth is filled with the glory of God. Here in our beloved New England we perceive that glory in wild forests and open fields, in clear lakes and rocky seashores, in mountains, dunes, and rolling hills. With Martin Luther, we know that "God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and the flowers and the clouds and stars." With Thomas Aquinas, we affirm that "Revelation comes in two volumes - the Bible and nature." The world is God's creation, and God delights in it ("God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good," Genesis 1:31; "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows [God's] handiwork," Psalm 19:1). The land and the rivers, the air and the sea belong to God, not to human beings ("The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it," Psalm 24:1). We are part of the created order, not separate from it, and our first calling by God is to be the caretakers of creation (Genesis 2:4b-8, 15). Reckless destruction of nature is a sign of estrangement from God. ("There is . . . no knowledge of God in the land . . . Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing," Hosea 4:1b, 3; "Hurt not the earth, neither the sea nor the trees," Revelation 7:3).

God's earth and all God's creatures now face perilous and potentially cataclysmic changes as a direct result of human activities. New Englanders are acutely aware of the environmental challenges we face in our own small corner of the world, from the collapse of fisheries to the loss of farmlands and wetlands, from smog to acid rain. Airborne mercury poisoning, suburban sprawl, the loss of wilderness, overuse of pesticides and other toxins, extinction of species - these are just a few of the environmental hazards with which we must contend.

One of the most daunting challenges we face is global climate change. Many scientists agree that if we burn fossil fuels at expected rates, global warming caused by human activities could raise worldwide average temperatures between 3 and 11 degrees Fahrenheit in this century. In New England, climate change may cause flooding in coastal areas, reduce the quality of our region's fresh water, imperil agriculture, and increase the outbreaks of infectious disease. Within this century, New England may lose its maple, birch, and beech trees. We face the loss of our spectacular fall colors and the end of fall-foliage tourism, as well as the destruction of our region's maple sugar industry. (1)

Global warming is but one stark example of the troubled relationship between humanity and the natural world. Environmental issues are not just scientific, political, or economic issues, but ones that are profoundly moral and spiritual, as well. As Christians we cannot remain silent.

Christianity offers an imperiled world the conviction that God's creation is good, and that God in Christ has redeemed not only the individual human soul, but also the whole of creation. In Christ, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). Creation is thus made new (Revelation 21:5).

Just as God's salvation encompasses all creation, so too does Jesus call us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Who is our neighbor? When Jesus was asked that question, he responded with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Today, the natural world is under assault, forests are being stripped and oceans plundered, natural resources are being exhausted and entire species killed. Today, the world is being stripped, beaten, and left half dead. Is it not possible to recognize all creation as our "neighbor"?

The poor, the marginalized, and the least powerful of our human neighbors are those who suffer most from illness and pollution caused by environmental degradation. Generators, incinerators, and waste disposal facilities are concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods; children in our inner cities suffer alarming rates of asthma; overemphasis on the use of private vehicles deprives the poor of transportation. Exploitation of the poor is closely linked to exploitation of the earth, and our quest for social justice and economic sustainability must rest on a foundation of ecological stability. As baptized Christians, we are clearly called to care for creation, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Through prayer and action to protect the earth, we acknowledge the ongoing redemption of all creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19a), and we minister to Christ himself, who particularly identifies with the outcast and suffering (Matthew 25:35-36).

Lest we experience despair, lest we feel the hopeless conviction that it is too late to change anything, too late to turn this around, we must root ourselves in the deepest convictions of our faith. We put our trust in a God who loves every inch of creation and whose covenant with Creation can never be broken ("I will . . . remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth," Genesis 9:16). We share in Christ's crucifixion, letting ourselves feel and mourn the wounds of Creation. We share in Christ's resurrection, bearing witness to the Christ who bursts out of the tomb, who proclaims that life, not death, has the last word, and who gives us power to roll away the stone. We receive the Holy Spirit, source of all truth, who sends forth faithful stewards of God's creation. We nourish ourselves at the Eucharistic table, where Christ gives himself to us in the natural elements of bread and wine, and restores our connections not only with God and one another, but also with the whole web of creation.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we commit ourselves and we urge every Episcopalian in every parish and diocese throughout the Province of New England:

- To act together to honor the goodness and sacredness of God's creation;
- To acknowledge the urgency of the planetary crisis in which we now find ourselves;
- To pray and take action to restore a right relationship between humankind and creation;
- To lift up prayers in personal and public worship for environmental justice, human rights, and sustainable development;
- To repent of greed and waste, and to seek simplicity of life;
- To commit ourselves to energy conservation and the use of clean, renewable sources of energy;
- To reduce, reuse, and recycle, and as far as possible to buy products from recycled materials;
- To realize that, through participation in community, public policy, and business decision-making, we have corporate as well as individual opportunities to practice environmental stewardship and justice;
- To seek to understand and uproot the political, social, and economic causes of environmental abuse.

In order to support these commitments, we call for a

Provincial Convocation on the Environment in 2003.

Who will believe the church's declaration that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16) if we ourselves do not? By committing ourselves to join with others in protecting the integrity of God's

creation, we are living out the promises of our baptism and participating in God's mission to restore all people and all creation to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Faithfully in the name of Christ and all creation,

The Episcopal Bishops of New England:

The Right Reverend Andrew D. Smith, Bishop of Connecticut

The Right Reverend James E. Curry, Bishop Suffragan of Connecticut

The Right Reverend Wilfrido Ramos-Orench, Bishop Suffragan of Connecticut

The Right Reverend Chilton R. Knudsen, Bishop of Maine

The Right Reverend M. Thomas Shaw, III, SSJE, Bishop of Massachusetts

The Right Reverend Roy F. Cederholm, Jr., Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts

The Right Reverend Gayle E. Harris, Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts

The Right Reverend Douglas E. Theuner, Bishop of New Hampshire

The Right Reverend Geralyn Wolf, Bishop of Rhode Island

The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely, Bishop of Vermont

The Right Reverend Gordon P. Scruton, Bishop of Western Massachusetts

*Sent to the Episcopal Churches of Province One on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ,
February 2, 2003.*

(1) For an examination of the effects of global warming in New England, see New England Regional Assessment Group. 2001. Preparing for Climate Change: The Potential Consequences of Climate Variability and Change. New England Regional Overview, U.S. Global Change Research Program, 96 pp., University of New Hampshire (<http://www.necci.sr.unh.edu/2001-NEERA-report.html>)