



The United Church  
of Canada  
General Council

# GC27 Report of the Task Force on the Environment

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## Report Excerpts

### Statement of Goals

#### 1. **To Awaken** the United Church:

- a. to the extent and the depth of the environmental crisis (helping people to "live into" the tensions involved in facing up to the crisis);
- b. to alternatives open to us in dealing with given environmental problems;
- c. to sense that we can share with other concerned people a desire to undertake responsible action in these matters in the name of our shared humanity and common destiny;
- d. to explore the grounding we have in the biblical heritage, and to explore its treasury of insights and perspectives in relation to care for the environment;
- e. to face the possibility that within our traditional understandings of man's role in creation, we may find misunderstandings and ambiguities which we must now repudiate.

#### 2. **To Generate** in the United Church an educational process

- a. with power to develop or deepen a new consciousness of ecology within the church;
- b. which can sustain people involved in the "long haul" required for any effective contribution;
- c. which can be used to help develop forms of action which can be taken by individuals and groups.

3. To Develop a capacity for the United Church to respond, when requested, to specific local situations involving environmental issues (with funds, trained people) or to take appropriate initiatives...

The second stage in our reflections involved listening to stories from several Canadian regions where serious attempts have been made (and are still being made) to deal responsibly with environmental concerns; for example, the Qu'Appelle Valley River Basin and the developments in Northern Manitoba.

The recital of these encounters was important and decisive in the developing understanding of this Task Force. They showed that:

1. a determined effort at serious ecological education and action can make a recognizable contribution to the public's perception of the issues at stake;
2. the emotional cost of such involvement is very high to the people who become involved. They must have strong support to endure the deep stresses which such action produces.

In short, three things became clear;

- the urgency of the crisis
- the reluctance of the Canadian public to receive its urgency
- the high cost to those who struggle with it.

Following this, we repeatedly asked what resources are there to deal with these three conditions? Asking this question led us to a deeper appropriation of one resource closer to us than to some of the other people deeply committed to these concerns. We refer to the scriptures of the Jewish-Christian tradition, a treasury of understanding and insight and power which we, as a church, have a special mandate to offer to the ecological arena.

In particular, we identified two basic biblical "images" which we explored for understanding of our role in matters of ecology.

## 1. The "Gardener" Image

Consideration of Genesis enabled us to enter a contemporary debate which has centered in some probing questions about the view of man found in the Bible, and its influence in

determining the way people shaped by this view have acted in the world.

In recent years a number of writers have expressed the view that the biblical and Christian tradition constitutes a serious menace to right thinking about ecology. These writers see in the church's theological tradition (and in the biblical documents themselves, as well) a misplaced and dangerous emphasis on the theme of human dominance over nature.

These critics see in this tradition an anthropocentric view of things which, they assert, has had much to do with shaping a scientific, technological mentality that has ridden roughshod over nature, encouraged man to pillage the planet's resources and radically damage the earth and its environment, perhaps fatally.

This story is long and very complicated, particularly so if one seeks to understand and unravel the many strands of thought which make up western man's sensibility at this point in history. As a church we must be prepared to listen carefully to these critics of our past performance. But with respect to the biblical documents themselves (putting on one side how they may have been used in support of various positions in the course of the story), we believe that it is just plain wrong-headed to argue that the theme of man's right to trample nature is a central or basic theme in the scriptures themselves. Such a view involves a serious misreading of the basic biblical images of man.\*

\*(We use the word "man" generically throughout this section, as we believe Genesis does as well, and ask that it be so understood.)

Looking into Genesis we found something other than this view of man as an autonomous, self-creating overlord. We found a gardener!

We found:

- a being dependent upon God for his creation and preservation, not an autonomous, self-creating overlord;
- a being compounded of the "dust of the ground" and the "breath of life"; a being who thus partakes in both the earthiness of nature and a transcendence given by God, linked to both;
- a being set in the world with a mandate to be;
- a **gardener** of the earth, responsible to God for its care;
- a **steward** of what has been given into his keeping;
- a being set in a world which will not yield its full fruitfulness to manipulative selfish aims because it is not his to do with as he pleases. It is not designed for his sole and exclusive

lordship and use (animals in his care, for example, have rights he must not ignore);

- a being who has a special and God-given mandate to be creative in this world, both in his relation to the natural world to which he is organically linked, and to the cultural creations of which he is capable in concert with his fellows;
- a being, who in the exercise of powers delegated by God, is under a solemn warning against abuse of the creator's intention.

An appreciation of these biblical images should save us from shifting from the basic grounding they provide for understanding man's unique and necessary role in the management of the earth and its resources. Our point of entry should be "...the kind of anthropocentrism of Genesis I, where man's dominion means the control of nature in cooperation with the intentions of the creator within the natural frame-work in which he had set us...We cannot really escape the burden of this controlling relationship. The question, in fact, is not **whether** we shall exercise dominion over the earth, but **how**." (Derr, *Ecology and Human Liberation*)

There could be some who would say that this ancient image is too "pastoral," too agricultural, to speak to the highly technical society in which most of us live. It is our contention, on the contrary, that this image of man as gardener has fresh potency for our situation. It carries in it a corrective of the highly manipulative attitudes toward our surroundings to which industrial man has fallen victim. It calls us to "garden" the technological environment we have generated-to apply to it the alert, responsible, harmonious, conserving interventions which are the hallmark of the good gardener. The factory needs these qualities equally with the farm.

## 2. The "Partner" Image

The second image of man we found in Genesis is that of the partner-the one who cannot find fullness of being for himself or by himself Without a partner Adam is incomplete, unfulfilled. So, God graciously acts creatively again. Once Eve enters the scene, these two, male and female, are set into a unique relationship with each other. As partners they share the mandate to manage the garden and make it fruitful.

Later in the story, when "sin" occurs, they are both affected. Sin separates them from each other, and issues in acts of blaming and self-justification. Their relationship to God changes from one of access and trust to one of guilt and hiding. They invent protective devices to

escape the vulnerability of being "naked," before each other, and before God.

Linked together still, but now, "after the fall," also separate and defensive, they go into exile from the garden – into history. Still under mandate as gardeners and stewards of the earth, still partners in need of each other, though prone to recrimination and self—justification, they move into the exciting, challenging enterprise man faces on planet earth.

We believe that these first, basic, biblical images of man have significance for the present time. Properly received by the kind of antenna that can interpret their symbolism and appropriate their power, they open up a radical critique of other "images" of man which are proving disastrous for man and the planet.

For instance, the image of "gardener" speaks correctively to reigning images of man as "conqueror of nature," "consumer," and "entrepreneur." It carries in it a certain respectfulness for the "garden," its needs, its imperatives, which these manipulative images have obscured. The image of man as "partner" judges the excessively competitive and "success" images of man which have stressed his individualism and deepened his sense of loneliness and isolation; the qualities which the Eden story understands as manifestations of the broken, "sinful" relationship of Adam and Eve.

We recognize, of course, that these biblical images are the language of poetry and theology. (But so are the other non-biblical "images" of man as "consumer" and "entrepreneur." The issue is which of these images makes better poetry, better theology, better anthropology, better sense!) None by itself answers the hard scientific questions about specific problems of pollution, or what amount of "growth" can be safely projected without full-scale ecological disaster. These tough questions remain, demanding answers.

What appropriate "image-language" can do is help us understand who we are who must work at such hard questions for the rest of our lives. Appropriate images can strengthen us and illumine for us resources of spirit, heart and mind, to make the demanding ecological task a meaningful one.

So, ancient biblical images emerge from our past. Through their primordial power we can re-learn that our humanness involves "responsible being" before God, to be lived out in caring for the garden, and for each other. This double insight underlies the whole range of the biblical documents.

# The Relation Between Ecology and Justice

Further reflection upon these images yielded another insight of great significance. As we worked with the "gardener-partner" images we became more deeply aware of how the Bible again and again connects the fruitfulness of nature with justice and faithfulness between man and man in history—and the breakdown of nature, her refusal to respond and be abundant, with injustice and deceit between man and man. This is so from the story of the Garden and the story of Cain onward (Genesis 4).

Throughout the Old and New Testaments this equation occurs. The prophetic vision of a world renewed by God almost always describes justice and love for the poor and oppressed in the same breath as the healing of conflicted nature (Isaiah 11:1-5). Justice and loving concern for the poor are seen as the key to nature's fruitfulness, the only path to a healthy environment. In the visions of the "End" (the Eschaton), God's justice and love for the poor will also heal the conflicts and contradictions in nature itself. So we find Jesus saying, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice and all these things shall be yours as well."

Again and again in scripture this fascinating inner connection between the basic image of man as gardener and partner, and the prophetic linkage of a healthy natural order and justice between people can be discerned. This inter-relationship between nature's fruitfulness and justice is, of course, not an automatic rule-of-thumb. It is rather a deep intuition, an affirmation of a genuine inner connection between man's call to be a "gardener-partner" in nature and in history. One of the members of the Task Force expressed this insight in a beautiful aphorism:

"In order to love each other,

We have to love the garden;

In order to love the garden,

We have to love each other."

(If years ago in the English River system in Ontario, the pulp and paper industry had known this truth and practised it, would we now have a poisoned waterway and a sick, disaffected native population'? The Berger Commission has captured accurately the same dialectic and made us conjure with it in its provocative title: *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*.)

## Further Insights

Associated with these ideas are a number of other biblical insights which grow out of this linkage of "gardener-partner" with deep potency for developing a sound, ecologically responsible theology. We can only refer to them briefly and commend them to the thoughtful consideration of those who will be taking up the consequences of our recommendations.

Among the most noteworthy biblical insights in this regard we mention:

- the gospel call to simplicity in life-style
- miracle stories of abundance (in both Old and New Testaments) when a "little becomes enough," because love and faith are present
- the calls to moderation and balance
- the visions of abundance for all which is the goal of a redeemed creation.

Such ideas as these are the stuff out of which biblical obedience can generate a fresh vision of social and personal life in the 20th century.

Such a view would not submerge man in nature, for clearly he had an important and indispensable role to play in the healing and care of nature. But there is in the biblical vision of man and his proper role a deep and loving recognition of his "collegiality" with the rest of nature. It calls him to a considerate and gentle approach to the (other) animals which God has made and man has himself "named," a recognition that he is "of the earth" and to it he will one day "return." There is throughout the Bible a sense of gratitude for the sacrifice of life which makes the life-process possible.

Among the major Christian figures in our long history who have best sensed this, perhaps St. Francis of Assisi can stand as symbol. Once all of this became clear to him he lived from that time on, as G.K. Chesterton said, being aware, "...that but for some strange mercy we could not even exist."

Deeply related to all of this biblical reflection are other fresh currents of living water of which we should be gratefully aware. Various thinkers (e.g. Teilhard de Chardin, many eastern sages) are inviting us to consider that none of our attitudes toward the other creatures in the garden can properly be merely utilitarian. Every grub and rock is also a participant in creation, has "rights"-rights not to be moved around, broken up, killed or marred or mutilated wantonly, for the mere purpose of implementing our design for the garden.

Other traditions have much to say about such matters to which we must listen. The Buddha's counsel that we must learn to curb desire and learn new ways of undemanding simplicity must also be received as of God.

Chesterton said of Francis that he constructed, "...a grammar of gratitude..." It's a potent phrase, one the church could use to advantage as we construct a new vision of what an ecological life-style looks like in this complex technological "garden" we have generated, with its insatiable demands upon the natural resources of the earth, and its tragic inequities between rich and poor.

Let us now restate a point made earlier. Passage to an ecologically-responsible lifestyle is closer to an act of repentance than to an educational process! Consequently, unless such biblical "images" as we have examined are so perceived that we receive their judgment, nothing of much consequence will emerge from being exposed to them once again. Some among us can testify to their judging, healing power, and their capacity to stir in us recognition of the Spirit who speaks through these scriptures, calling us to a more responsible life-stance. All of us are aware that we need much practice in listening to these words, and much support from one another if these stirrings in us are to blossom into fruitful and enduring stewardship.

This is a brief, highly compressed statement of the direction in which our reflections have led us, and how "concern for the environment" led us to a deeper appropriation of biblical wisdom with its clear-headed understanding of the inter-related character of man's role in nature and history.

We believe that the church in general would profit greatly if it could share a similar pilgrimage. Consequently, we feel impelled to press upon the church the proposition that these biblical images carry the basic organic and organizing power, capable of focussing the life and witness of The United Church of Canada in the years immediately ahead of us. We believe they speak to the inner longings of our people for a way of life which treats the earth more gently. We believe they have power to judge and discipline our appetites for material goods which have so encouraged uncontrolled growth, environmental degradation, and the depletion of the earth's resources.

We believe that as we spell out the implications of the biblical intuitions about the relation between care for the earth and care for the poor, there can take shape among us a fresh way of getting at the question of justice and mercy with which we have long been concerned.



In short, we feel we have generated a top priority item for the life and witness of The United Church of Canada, capable of giving focus and shape to much of what we, as a church, are presently undertaking in scattered and often frustrating ways. In the light of this report of our experience as a Task Force, we now present the following recommendations to the Twenty-seventh General Council:

## **Recommendations**

The basic recommendation of this Task Force is as follows:

1. THAT The United Church of Canada adopt and implement at all levels, local, regional and national, a new administrative and organizational goal, namely:

"The care of our earth with all its implications."

We perceive that this goal has deep implications in the areas of administration, education and advocacy. So we further recommend:

## **Administration**

2. THAT an agency of the General Council be established to initiate and monitor the procedures to achieve this goal throughout the church.

## **Education**

3. THAT the Division of Mission in Canada, in association with other educative agencies, devises an educational reflection-action curriculum enterprise, which helps to uncover the inter-relatedness of care of the earth and care for people;
4. THAT the curriculum of our theological colleges be designed to incorporate the goal of care of our earth with all its implications, and that this recommendation, if approved, be directed to the Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education.

## **Advocacy**

5. THAT the conferences be encouraged to develop capabilities for advocacy in environmental and ecological concerns to deal with emerging issues in this area, and to make available the necessary resources to support and encourage groups and individuals already dealing with environmental and ecological issues;
6. THAT the General Council continue to develop its capacity for advocacy in environmental and ecological issues by establishing or identifying an agency to take responsibility for such concerns; to have overview of all such issues throughout the church constituency; to provide support for regional agencies; and that such General Council agency be provided with staff capability;
7. THAT The United Church of Canada support as a principle, that for non—profit citizen groups working in the environmental and ecological area, the costs of expert advocacy services of their own selection be a reasonable charge against public funds.

It is recognizable that to achieve these goals, existing financial resources and others will have to be reallocated and new resources may have to be found;

8. THAT this Task Force on the environment be discharged.

1977 ROP, p. 50, 56, 491-99.

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