

WORLD STUDENT CHRISTIAN FEDERATION



Universal Day of Prayer for Students 2010

Bible Study

RENEWING THE EARTH: CLIMATE JUSTICE AND EQUITY

SCRIPTURAL TEXT

Psalm 104: 30: "When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth"

THE CHALLENGE

The reality of global climate change, resulting from the impact of accumulated human activities, make the renewal of the earth an urgent imperative. To renew entails rebuilding the disintegration and repairing damage. The harm done to the environment cannot be addressed rightly, adequately and in an enduring way without the implementation of climate justice policies.

*"When the policies and activities of one country or generation harm both other nations and later generations, they constitute serious injustices. Recognizing the broad threat posed by anthropogenic climate change, advocates for an international climate policy development process have expressly aimed to mitigate this pressing contemporary environmental threat in a manner that promotes justice."*¹

Responding adequately to climate change has remained an onerous task for world leaders, policymakers and for individuals.

ENVIRONMENTAL THEOLOGY

For the Church, the concept of environmental responsibility and climate justice stem out of its theology, ethics and spirituality. When theological and spiritual perceptions are weak or distorted, human attitudes and behaviors are likely to treat creation with levity and laxity.

¹ Preview of "Atmospheric Justice: A Political Theory of Climate Change" by Steve Vanderheiden (Winner of the 2009 Harold and Margaret Sprout Award of the ISA's Environmental Studies Section)

In the beginning

The opening chapters of the book of Genesis describe an unfolding process of creation, at the end of which; *“God looked at what he had done. All of it was very good”* (Gen. 1: 31). Creation was pleasant to dwell in, at peace and in harmony with itself and its Creator. Human responsibility for creation is recorded in Gen. 2: 15 - *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it”*. Cultivation, the care and guarding of the environment, was and still remains humankind’s fundamental privilege and responsibility.

Adam and Eve

With sin, which is the gratification and promotion of the human self beyond that appropriate to it, came disharmony and distortions to the earth. For example, what is recorded in Gen. 3:6 - *“The woman stared at the fruit. It looked beautiful and tasty. She wanted the wisdom that it would give her, and she ate some of the fruit. Her husband was there with her, so she gave some to him, and he ate it too”* resulted in Gen. 3: 17 - *“And he said to the man, Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse...”*

Cain and Abel

Cain’s answer to the question *“Where is your brother Abel?”* (Gen. 4: 9) to which he replied - *“How should I know? ... Am I supposed to look after my brother?”* got the reprimand from God - *“Because you killed Abel and made his blood run out on the ground, you will never be able to farm the land again”*. (Gen. 4: 11). The case of Cain and Abel is a clear demonstration that we are not only to care about ourselves but to consider how the things we do affect others, directly and indirectly.

The Flood

The destruction of every living creature on the earth with the flood was because *“The LORD saw how bad the people on earth were and that everything they thought and planned was evil”* and *“Cruelty and violence have spread everywhere.”* (Gen. 6: 5, 13). Their thought patterns and plans brought evil, cruelty and violence to others. The preservation and replenishing of the earth was made possible through Noah; *a just man/a righteous man* (Gen. 5:9).

In other words Noah did the right things.

Sin and the creation

The environmental crisis the world is facing today is one big demonstration of the gravity of the destructive power of sin and how extensively this can affect the well-being of others. Our own and our society’s attitudes and behaviors have a direct impact on creation.

The personal and corporate question then will be what kind of meaning and spirituality do other created things bring to us when and if we encounter them? Is our world one which revolves around us, or do we consider that we share the earth with others? Is there an understanding that the purpose of the earth is for the common good of all that exists in it - from the past, the present and for future

generations? Does creation exist to serve us only or do we equally have a responsibility to serve, save, replenish and renew it?

THE CALL FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE AND EQUITY

The flow of water in streams and rivers points us to the flow of life, as we drink it and use it in numerous aspects of our lives. Water is a major constituent of the human body and other living things. Rain waters the ground and causes plants to sprout. Tragically widespread pollution of water from fuel combustion, toxic waste and oil spillage means that millions are unable to have safe drinking water.

The top soil we stand, walk and play on is not only the source of our daily food, but the means of livelihood for 70 – 80 per cent of the population of most developing nations who engage in subsistent farming. Of equal importance is that these first few centimeters of earth are home to numerous living organisms and creatures who share the soil with us. When climatic conditions blow or wash off this top soil it brings untold hardship, suffering and death to many people, livestock and other creatures.

The poorest people of the world are already suffering the effects of a changing climate. Though these poor folk have done the least to bring about the present climatic conditions, they have been the first to feel the impact of it and bear the brunt of its devastations.

Some of the facts to consider as we think about atmospheric justice and equity are²:

- *Today's rich nations are responsible for global warming. Industrialized nations, where only about 20 percent of the world's population resides, have emitted far more greenhouse gas emissions than developing nations. Rich countries therefore face the biggest responsibility and burden for action to address climate change.*
- *Rich countries therefore must support developing nations adapt, to avoid the polluting (i.e. easier and cheaper) path to development—through financing, debt cancellations and technology transfer.*
- *The world's poorest countries account for just 0.4 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions. 45 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions are produced by the G8 countries alone.*
- *The environmental consequences of the policies of industrialized nations have had a large, detrimental and costly effect on developing countries — especially the poor in those countries, that are already burdened with debt and poverty. Developing world debt and poverty has diverted immense*

² Gleaned from various sources including: Ecological Spirituality, Eco-justice Notes, Eco-Ministries Newsletter 24/4/09, Climate Justice and Equity by Anup Shah 2009, World Bank, Transport Economics and Sector Policy Briefing, quoted in Collision Course: Freetrade's free ride on the global climate, New Economics Foundation 2000, The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, World Resources Institute report 2003, Center for Science and Environment 2002, Christian Aid report 1999, Down to Earth magazine 2007.

resources from sustainable development. It is unfair to expect the developing world to make emissions reductions in the same way.

- *Industrialized nations should owe over 600 billion dollars to the developing nations for the associated costs of climate changes. This is three times as much as the conventional debt that developing countries owe the developed ones. Some researchers have called this the “natural debt” of the North, as against the financial debt of the South.*
- *Developing countries will also be tackling climate change in other ways. Market and energy reforms to promote economic growth. Development of alternative fuels to reduce energy imports. Aggressive energy efficiency programs. Use of solar and other renewable energy to raise living standards in rural locations. Reducing deforestation. Slowing population growth; and switching from coal to natural gas to diversify energy sources and reduce air pollution.*

A COMMON OBLIGATION

The challenge to care for the environment, our common heritage, is a collective and universal duty belonging to all humanity. This responsibility is not just for the present but also to protect the interest of future generations. It is a responsibility that concerns us individually, the Church, communities, nation states and the international community.

To renew the earth we must be in solidarity with one another because we are all in this together. All the stakeholders must get involved. We need to make strong commitments to adopting more environment-friendly lifestyles. For us as students, we need knowledge-building programmes about the effects of climatic change and what needs to be done. Political advocacy will also be necessary to set the standards for best practices in emissions by industries, developing environmental policies, enacting climatic regulatory laws together with compensations for climatic damages caused. The Church should also bring issues of climatic change, justice and environmental responsibility and spirituality into her worship life.

**May the Spirit of God breathe on us so that new life will come to the earth.
Amen.**