

**“In Defense of Creation”  
Report from the  
Rocky Mountain Conference**

Three hearings for the Bishops’ revision of “In Defense of Creation” were held in the Rocky Mountain Conference in 2008.

**Environmental Degradation and Climate Change**

The first hearing addressed Environmental Degradation and Climate Change and was held prior to the start of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado on June 18, 2008. Close to 80 participants attended. The session was energized by national presenters, and enhanced by lively discussion and the free exchange of ideas.

After opening remarks from Bishop Warner Brown, Jr., Rev. Linda Gertenbach Coordinator of Church and Society Network, and Rev. Rebekah Simon-Peter, Director of BridgeWorks and Moderator, three panelists spoke. These panelists included Dr. James White, Director of the Institute for Arctic and Alpine Research of the University of Colorado, Rev. Peter Sawtell of Eco-Justice Ministries, and Ms. Diane Dandeneau of Colorado Interfaith Power and Light and Green Heart Institute.

Dr. White addressed the science of climate change and the realities of environmental degradation; his presentation left no doubt as to the reality of human impact on the planet: “We dominate planet earth’s ecosystems,” he emphasized. “We impact all of the basic functioning of the planet.” On the matter of climate change, he emphasized, “Are we causing climate change? Yes. This is not an equivocal yes. Just a plain yes. The greenhouse effect is real. In fact, it’s essential. Since the 1970s,” he explained, “the planet has warmed in a way that is only compatible with human activity. Because of it, we’re in the midst of the 6<sup>th</sup> great mass extinction on this planet.” Dr. White ended his presentation with this challenge to persons of faith: “We have power. When will we accept responsibility?”

Rev. Peter Sawtell raised interesting theological issues: 1. What is the nature of “good” that God intends for us? Is it just the salvation of human souls? Is it unconstrained growth and acquisition of stuff? The word shalom indicates that it’s about relationships grounded in justice and community. 2. Who is our neighbor? While in principle it’s everyone; in reality it’s just those close to us. We need to consider that future generations have a moral claim on us. 3. What is the role of precaution in a time of risk? Given the enormity of the ecological crises unfolding around us, business as usual is sin.

Ms. Diane Dandeneau echoed the sacred nature of creation, as evidenced by biblical texts. She noted that Christianity has adopted the popular world view of objectification of creation: The earth is a machine that is ours to use as we see fit. It’s had disastrous effects. We need to transform our world view.

After hearing these dynamic presentations, the audience of 70+ people broke up into small groups to discuss the following question: What motivates you as a person of faith and makes you passionate to want the church to be part of the solution? Lively and spirited discussions took place, facilitated by small group leaders from the Church and Society Network advocating for Peace with Justice.

While specific responses are included below, they ranged from love of nature, to concern for children, grandchildren and future generations, to ministers, spiritual retreat, the presence and promise of the Kingdom of God, hymns such as “This Is My Father’s World,” and scriptural texts such as Genesis 1. Additionally, many participants brought with them a deep awareness of wasteful consumerism in our churches, in our lifestyles, and in the disparity between first world nations and the rest of the world. A sense of entitlement was identified as a contributing factor. The need for simpler lifestyles and less impact on the earth was emphasized. A concern for living in integrity with creation as well as our neighbors was emphasized. Part of this call for integrity arose from a desire for the church to look beyond itself to focus on pressing issues relevant to the larger world.

After our initial small group sharing, we asked people to make specific recommendations to the Bishops. Again, specific responses are included below. The urgency and passion can be summed up in this way: If environmental issues are not addressed, everything else will be irrelevant; all of life depends upon healthy ecosystems. We must also deal with these twin emphases: 1) Why do we in industrialized nations over-consume? What is our real hunger? What is we are trying to satisfy? 2) How can we help the poor, who are suffering the most because of the ecological crises engendered by our consumption? For too long, the Church has been part of the problem not the solution. Now, Bishops, please help us understand and visualize what it means to be an alternative community that mirrors and brings forth the Kingdom of God.

**“What motivates you as a person of faith and makes you passionate to want the church to be part of the solution?”**

- Awareness of the lack of and need for natural resources around the planet
- The desire to make the church relevant to today’s pressing concerns
- I want to live with integrity in God’s creation as a good steward of God’s sacred ground.
- The promise and presence of God’s Kingdom.
- The Hymn: This is My Father’s (Maker’s) World”
- Awareness that the poor are highly impacted by climate change and environmental degradation
- Concern for future generations: “This is My Father’s World” that we’ve inherited; when we “Pass It On” to grandkids, what will they inherit?
- I was inspired by a presentation at a women’s retreat; but now frustrated at lack of response.
- Strong desire to re-image our relationship to nature, Mother Earth.
- Love of nature and fear that future generations will not be able to enjoy it.

- Deep perception of oneness with creation and the compelling need to act.
- Children are pushing me to ecological action
- An Inconvenient Truth movie opened my eyes and showed me the urgency of our situation
- Desire to have integrity with other human beings who live in other countries that are either experiencing ill effects of environmental degradation or whose countries have taken a greater lead on combating climate change and introducing sustainable ways of living. The US needs to catch up and be a leader in these matters.
- I live in a community with a heightened emphasis on recycling and ecology and would like to see that adopted by other communities and the church as a whole.
- My minister has played a large role in helping me want to exercise good stewardship
- Gas prices!; but too often we care more about gas prices than the state of health of the planet.
- We are social entrepreneurs; working on replanting the rainforests.
- We see the convergence of science and spirituality
- Moral and social activism play an important role in my sense of faith and global citizenship
- Genesis 1 has awakened a holy interest in me to be a good steward of creation
- The trashing of creation with pollution disturbs me and makes me want to act
- The beauty of God's creation energizes me to want to save it and pass it on to future generations
- Awareness of poverty and violence caused by 1<sup>st</sup> World nations' lifestyles; there is a great disparity between how we live and how most others on the planet live.
- Being a good neighbor to future generations. Neighborliness crosses time and generations.
- Awareness that we have become used to too easy a life.
- Concern that earth is the vessel for God's Spirit.
- Waste
- Awareness that militarism threatens ecological balances
- What shape will the earth be in for our grandchildren?
- Awareness that loving God includes loving Creation.
- My call to ministry came from the first In Defense of Creation.
- Even though I left the church of my youth (Presbyterian), and gave up on religion in general, I have great respect for the original "In Defense of Creation" and its unapologetic stance for all life.

**“How should the UMC respond to environmental degradation and climate change? What do you want the Bishops to hear?”**

- Have preachers attend scientific events and bring it into the church; it's important that correct scientific information gets out to people and is not be undermined by politics
- Have every congregation calculate carbon footprint and lead with concrete steps

- Raise consciousness of increasing materialism; go back to spirituality of simplicity
- Address as a pastoral care issue; not just a justice issue. Pastors will need training on this.
- Concentrate on change; help churches redefine “success.” Industrialized “way of life” is a fundamental threat to life on earth. We must see redress for injustice, exploitation.
- Extend our understanding of “neighbor”—join forces spiritually through ecumenical movement.
- The church needs to be a change agent; helping people to cultivate personal awareness and connectedness to Creation; and to take personal responsibility for environmental stewardship. Children in particular need to learn about environmental stewardship. They can pass on the message very effectively!
- It’s important for us to all know the church’s defined position in relation to the eco-crisis
- Have the church dialogue with oil and gas companies to bring about agreements on production and pollution
- Get at the root causes of consumerism and consumption; We have a sense of entitlement; an unconscious sense of deserving/demanding the best even when it undermines the common good.
- Look at how to reduce waste in churches: paper, plastic, and light
- Political inquiry about highest priorities are needed
- We need to open ourselves to God’s answers: space, science, technology?
- We have unenlightened farming practices that damage soil and depend too heavily on fertilizers. Increasing number of “dead zones” in our oceans are one symptom of this.
- We need to redefine “the good life.”
- We need to re-introduce children to nature; I’m concerned about “nature deficit disorder”
- Water pollution is a grave concern—including heavy metals, and household and pharmaceutical waster in the water supply.
- We need to call for the cooperation of business and politics in making a difference.
- When it comes to energy development, we in the West need to get over “not in my back yard.” At the same time that we need to promote sane and environmentally conscious development.
- The UMC should be a nationwide leader in environmental stewardship through converting to using all biodegradable materials and through recycling of paper bulletins, cups, plates, and plastic water bottles. Reducing our waste output could have significant effect.
- What good will the new IDC document really do? Too often, we UMs pass a resolution and think that we have done something. How will this statement make a real difference? Let it function in such a way that it transforms us and shows us how to be an alternative community that will mirror and bring forth the Kingdom of God.

## Poverty, Environment and the Church

Our second session, "Poverty, Environment and the Church," was held on Sunday, July 27, 2008 at Trinity United Methodist Church in Denver CO. Following the breaking of bread, the Rev. Linda Gertenbach moderated a lively panel of presenters.

Dr. Don Bossart, retired professor from Iliff School of Theology and President of the United Nations Association of Colorado spoke about the UN vision of promoting the global common good. He then described the millennium development goals and gave a short assessment on the relevant ones. While some progress has been made reducing global poverty, further progress depends upon international cooperation and commitment. Reverend Mary Ann Dimand, former professor of economics at various colleges and now a probationary member of the Rocky Mountain Conference, spoke about economic considerations related to global poverty. The Church needs to be a conversation partner as "development" groups come together to vision and strategize. Sarah Harrington, lay person at Trinity United Methodist Church and volunteer with the ONE Campaign and Bread for the World, offered some statistics about hunger/poverty issues, spoke of Bread's advocacy work and her own personal journey toward passion and commitment.

After these presentations, 35 participants broke into small groups and responded to the following question: What motivates you as a person of faith and makes you passionate to want the Church to be part of the solution? (for global poverty and disease.) Personal experience impacted people the most. Knowledge gained through the Church came in a close second. The teachings of the Church has helped many people to understand that poverty is not God's will. A detailed list of responses follows.

Next the participants responded to this question: How should the UMC respond to global poverty, disease and the environment? While specific answers are listed below, participants overwhelmingly saw the positive influence the Church can have through education, advocacy, mentoring, connecting with community agencies, using our Biblical texts for the greater good. Perhaps it can be summed up in this way: The Church has a BIG VOICE—let's use it! At the same, how to keep motivation strong over time was addressed.

Finally, participants reflected on this question: What actions would you like do you want the Bishops to hear from you about how to address global poverty? Again, participants encouraged the Bishops to engage the Church and World with the Gospel message by exercising visionary leadership both within the church and amongst agencies. Full responses are listed below.

### **What motivates you as a person of faith and makes you passionate to want the Church to be part of the solution? (for global poverty and disease.)**

- Remembering the DDT generation
- Experiencing becoming sick and poor
- Parents' example of volunteering in soup kitchens

- Travel/living in another country and seeing 3<sup>rd</sup> world cultures
- Been there/done that—being poor and trying to negotiate agencies
- Serving at soup kitchens etc. –“Knowing hungry people provides motivation to find solutions”
- Mission trips—“being able to get malaria medication easily when it’s not available to many living in malaria prone areas.”—calls forth questions about justice.
- Grew up with love of the earth and fellow creatures.
- Biblical mandates: “literal reading of Gospel call to address poverty is needed to provide grounding for action—caring for the poor is not optional”
- Church experience and teaching
- UMW
- Human tendency for compassion/empathy
- Anger at injustice and unfairness
- Books such as Ending Hunger Now

#### **How should the UMC respond to global poverty, disease and the environment?**

- Education around respect for and care for all of God’s creation.
- Appreciation of the interconnectedness of all creation.
- Promote tolerance and acceptance
- Establish peace with justice committees in local churches
- Encourage activism—personal, faith based involvement
- Educate to breakdown “us versus them” mentality-treat those with needs with dignity/respect, authentic empathy
- Read scripture to guide action
- Encourage advocacy on behalf of the poor
- Promote larger view of “family”—from immediate to global
- Church should be a visionary—we need a new paradigm—we need communities where folks in need are “matched” with folks thriving. Church provides mentors.
- “The Church should be a visionary—we can take the message to the non-churched population.
- The Church needs to make connections with a variety of agencies involved with the poor and the poor themselves.
- The Church has a BIG VOICE and needs to express it more publicly—be involved in cross-disciplinary conversations
- Investigate the barriers to getting food/resources to the hungry and exert Church’s influence and resources
- A caution: Motivation can weaken—problems seem overwhelming, beyond our influence. Church can provide hope with visions of God’s realm.

#### **What do you want the Bishops to hear from you?**

- Church has to raise the difficult questions. E.g. redistribution of wealth
- Bishops need to “exert their influence” on church leaders to raise awareness in churches about poverty/disease. (Someone commented they had never heard a sermon about poverty!)

- Take a comprehensive look at curricula/program at every level to assure an emphasis on poverty/disease/environmental stewardship
- Develop materials to help churches empower folks for effective advocacy
- Make these issues on-going emphases after publication of the revised document. (Where's the action?)
- Encourage international cooperation and relationships
- Look into USA commitments to the UN. Encourage support of the UN.
- Set measurable targets for any "program" that is developed with built-in evaluation.

### **A World Awash in Weapons**

Our third session, "A World Awash in Weapons" was held on Sunday, October 26, 2008 at Wheat Ridge in Wheat Ridge CO. Twenty passionate, well-informed persons participated. The Rev. Roger Wolsey moderated a panel of top notch individuals including Robert Kinsey from the Colorado Coalition for the Prevention of Nuclear War, economist and UM clergy Mary Ann Dimand who spoke on strategies of war and peace using game theory, and Bill Sulzman from Citizens for Peace in Space.

Each panelist provided unique, helpful expertise. Especially moving was the visual display depicting and describing the horrors of nuclear consequences on the nation of Japan (some 20 self-standing posters) brought in by Bob Kinsey who has them on loan from the people who made them in Japan.

The small groups, however, were the heart of the experience. Each group consisted of about 7-8 people. In response to the discussion questions, personal stories were passionately shared. The unique role of faith in motivating and inspiring people to take action was a common thread throughout the day. Each person, in their own way, expressed how their faith instilled in them the call to live in love, faith, and confidence, instead of in fear. The Church has a unique role in society to help people overcome fear. A world without fear could give rise to a world without weapons. Let the Church help people see with new eyes! We await the Kingdom of God. In the meantime, let the Church take a strong stand for peace. Please see detailed responses below. Also, thanks to Tiffany Baker, Peace with Justice intern for her help with this session.

#### **What motivates you as a person of faith and makes you passionate to want the Church to be part of the solution?**

- Young people's hunger for prophetic voice
- Ever-increasing danger of damage
- It's a place for study of and conversation about problems and solutions, though we often preach to the choir!
- The church should be the pinnacle of peace
- Example of Freedom Rides: Religious leaders taking risks for peace and unity
- Hooked on Christian belief and internationalism
- Faith in the work-in-progress

- Alternative governance structure of church can remind us that we're united in a realm/kingdom for EVERYONE
- The farther we are from the face of war, the less personal it becomes. The church has a unique role to help people overcome fear.
- Church goes beyond politics and culture—unique position to bridge spaces that divide people and interests
- Cross-cultural personal stake is the outcome of speaking for marginalized voices

**How should the UMC respond to “a world awash in weapons?” What do you want the Bishops to hear?**

- UMC should work for any cause that works against proliferation
- Educate people on the extent of the threat
- Church's role in helping people see with new eyes
- Help change paradigm (A world that HAS to have weapons)
- Church needs to legitimize “non-church” partners (hosting in churches, holding forums)
- Make it a personal connection—or it's easy to see people as “other”
- Take a stand and then help people transition/transform (People caught up/employed by the Military Industrial Complex)
- Make more plowshares, instead of trying to continually beat swords into plowshares
- Church help society with its “addiction” (Treating reliance on military industrial complex the same as an addiction to alcohol or drugs)
- Hold the mirror up and see the U.S. as the Roman empire. What would Jesus say to us today?
- Redefine prophetic/pastoral ministry (Conflicted role of military chaplains and pastors serving congregations near military bases)
- Why not become a “Peace Church” like the Quakers?
- Need to offer a focused statement with a proposed plan of application; must do ACTION, not just study

Respectfully submitted by,

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