

Foreword

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It is not that long ago that the vast majority of Christians, if asked what the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 had to do with caring for our environment, would have been hard pressed to come up with an answer. There are still today probably many who struggle to relate the two. But in the last few decades, environmental concerns have become thoroughly integrated into our Christian lives and theology, and they have everything to do with mission.

I have said that, for Christians, mission is “nothing else but a state of being, a state of living responsibly to all that we have received from God; a state of allowing his love to pour through us; of letting ourselves become the people God calls us to be...”¹ For the Anglican Communion, Edinburgh was a critical element in helping us to define who we are as a church: it helped us to recognise that our interdependence as Christians is key to our identity, especially viewed against the Church’s tendency in past millennia to depend on centralised authority as opposed to being rooted in God’s mission. Our 2008 Lambeth Conference exemplified how we have sought to be faithful to a call to be a mission-shaped Communion.

Beginning at the Lambeth Conference of 1968, the process of defining who we are has led to a recognition that living responsibly to all that God has given us includes caring for the physical world around us, and that this should become embodied in our core vision and mission statements. In the Anglican Communion as a whole, we have included an environmental strand as one of our “Five Marks of Mission”: the fifth Mark is “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” A whole section of the 2008 Lambeth

¹ “Anglicans in Mission — Here am I, Lord, Send me!” <http://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2011/11/anglicans-in-mission-here-am-i-lord.html> Accessed July 1, 2015

Conference was devoted to the environment. In my own church in Southern Africa, our Vision and Mission Statement says that we seek to be “Anchored in the love of Christ, Committed to God’s mission, and Transformed by the Holy Spirit” and concern for the environment is one of eight priorities we have identified within that vision.

Edinburgh 1910 highlighted the growth of Christianity as a global religion whose centre of gravity was shifting to the South and to Africa. But as the 20th century unfolded, the joy of seeing this growth was dampened by the continued existence of a global divide between North and South in material (if not in spiritual) terms. Alongside this, we began from the 1960s to recognise that there was a mounting ecological crisis. Despite the lack of global political agreement on how to arrest and reverse the deterioration of our environment, the “increasingly strong and more frequent extreme weather events; changes in seasonal weather patterns; rising levels of seawater; acidification of seawater and depleted fishing grounds; the devastating impacts of pollution; deforestation, and destructive mining and energy extraction and transportation practices”² are scientific realities that the world can hardly ignore.

The ecological crisis is not only a scientific, socio-economic and political issue. As an international group of concerned Anglican bishops said on Good Friday 2015, it is a spiritual issue “because the roadblock to effective action relates to basic existential issues of how human life is framed and valued: including the competing moral claims of present and future generations, human versus non-human interests, and how the lifestyle of wealthy countries is to be balanced against the basic needs of the developing world. For this reason the Church must urgently find its collective moral voice.”³

This volume is an attempt to reflect a “collective moral voice” on climate change in global Christianity. The essays which follow are from across the globe and from various branches of Christianity: from African-initiated churches, from the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, Lutheran and evangelical churches among others. The World Council of Churches, the Lausanne Movement, Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch

2 *The world is our host: A call to urgent action for climate justice*, The Anglican Consultative Council and the Anglican Communion Environmental Network, 2015.

3 *Ibid.*

Bartholomew have all joined individual churches and communions of churches in calling on humanity to relate to the Creation with respect and love.

The ramifications of our ecological crisis make it, in the view of the bishops I have quoted, “the most urgent moral issue of our day” and time is of the essence in addressing it. Our Creator expects us to respect and care for God’s earth and creation. We cannot claim to love God and Jesus while watching the earth be destroyed. Nevertheless, if through the Holy Spirit Christians heed the call to serve creation as the Creator intended, and we change our attitudes towards the natural world, we can do our part in turning the situation around.

God who created humanity is also God who created the natural world. The English translation of the creation narratives in the book of Genesis presents Adam independent and disconnected from the earth. However, the name Adam is derived from the Hebrew *adamah*, which translates as earth—suggesting human relationship with the natural world. Moreover, we need to respect the holiness and sacredness of creation as the avenue through which we experience the Creator. We are commanded by the Creator to serve (*ebed*) and protect (*shamar*) the Creation (Genesis 2:15). In short, the God who endowed humanity with natural rights is the same God who reveals the Godself in the creation. Our failure to serve and protect the earth is not only immoral but also sinful.

God entrusted the earth to our care but we humans are complicit in its destruction. Our failure to defend the environment represents a crisis of faith, and Christian mission as the *missio Dei* invites us to repent for our involvement in the destruction of God’s earth as well as in the exploitation of the poor. In our era, Christian mission involves confronting the sinful structures and acts that work against God’s purposes on earth. As participants in God’s mission, we are invited to serve God’s creation after the pattern of Christ—who came not to be served but to serve.

In doing so, we will also be addressing a critical social justice issue for billions of God’s people. The most vulnerable in our communities bear a disproportionate burden of the environmental degradation we suffer. The poor and the powerless watch helplessly as powerful political and capitalistic interests rob them of their dignity and ancestral lands. Women watch their children die from climate-related illnesses. Women and children have to walk long

distances to fetch water. In parts of the world, those who resist the forces of greed and material accumulation become victims of assassination—there are growing numbers of violent murders of environmental activists and defenders of the earth.

All creation is a family of ecologically interconnected beings. Yet, as in apartheid South Africa and colonial Africa, a very small group controls our economies across the globe while many languish in abject poverty. The world is blessed with abundant natural resources, yet more than one billion people live on less than a dollar a day. About 2.7 billion live on less than \$2 a day. Christian mission should propel us into fighting the unjust economic and political systems which contribute to such poverty and to our environmental crisis. Just as Christians united in the past to fight against colonialism and apartheid, so today we must fight against the ecological crisis, which has the potential to end all life as we know it.

The ecological crisis presents a Kairos moment for Christianity. Planted in varied Christian traditions, this volume alerts us to the reality that our future and the future of our descendants depends on how we act today. Including valuable global lessons and insights for the Church and the world, it invites us to rethink our socioeconomic and political assumptions as well as our theologies in human/earth relationships. Most importantly it shows that ecologically-developed Christian theologies can inform our ecological responsibilities and actions.

Amidst the displacement of the poor, disappearing rain forests and the increase in climate-related extreme weather phenomena, our efforts may seem helpless. As Christians, however, we follow the Lord who conquered death through selfless love. His victory over death and his Great Commission to the Church to participate in the mission of God assure us that our earth-caring mission can succeed and that, with God on our side, we will defeat and overcome this crisis and secure the future for generations to come.

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