

Ecumenical Water Network:

Churches for Water in Africa

Bishop Geoff Davies

Theological and Biblical Reflection:

24th May 2007

What we are doing in this session is most important. I had not realized the importance until I reflected on it and realized that this session is critically important – if not the most important – and if it is important it means you all have to do some serious and hard work! And its importance does not lie in anything I would say but in what you think and say and believe. Its importance is because what we believe affects, influences and directs our behaviour. So we need to establish a belief and theological basis for our actions. If I shift some of our thinking, good!

In doing this, I want to reflect under three sections:

- I. First, a general introduction;
 - II. Second, a Biblical reflection on water;
 - III. Third, an outline of the four topics for reflection and discussion, as given in your programme.
- I. Under the general introduction I want us to consider a number of basic principles we as Christians should be considering:

First, I want us to recognize that we Christians worship a Creator God.

What are the very first words of the Bible? *In the beginning God.....In the beginning God created.....God created the heavens and the earth.*

I mention this as so often churches concentrate on the salvation offered by Jesus, and they neglect Jesus' Father and our Father, who is not only Father but creator. The WCC is promoting the keeping of Creation Tide for September and the beginning of October, taking in St. Francis Day on 4 October.

Second, I want to establish with you that God is concerned about all of Creation, and not just us humans. At the end of the creation story in Genesis (1:31) *God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good.* Not just us humans, but everything he had made was very good. When talking of water, we cannot separate it from the totality of the natural environment.

We Christians have made a great mistake in being “anthropocentric” in our theology – in other words, being human centred, thinking that God is only concerned about us and our salvation, and believing that the rest of creation exists only for our benefit – and I need to add, for our exploitation. Everything God created is good and has value. We make this mistake of thinking God is only concerned about us at our peril because,

- a) We cannot live without the rest of creation – we are dependent on it. Prof Wangari Maathai, first African women and environmentalist Nobel Peace Laureate, points out that we would not survive had God created us before the sixth day.

- b) We cannot live or see ourselves separated from nature or see nature as an object, to be exploited for our use. If the natural environment does not survive, we won't survive. Thomas Berry says we must see nature as a "subject", being given respect and having a right to existence, just as we need respect, with a right to existence.

In John 3:12, we read "*God so loved the world.*" – not us only, but the world and all that is in it.

Third, I want us to recognize that God wants us to establish justice and equity.

This is the foundation on which we build our church of love.

Isaiah 5:8-10.

Yahweh's response to Israel's shift of allegiance from true spirituality to secular profit motives illustrates the close link between Israel's landscape and what is happening in the soul of the nation. Yahweh withdraws the nation's water by sending drought:

*Who gives autumn and spring rains in season,
Who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.
Your wrongdoings have kept these away;
Your sins have deprived you of good.
Among my people are wicked men
Who lie in wait like men who snare birds,
Their houses are full of deceit;
They have become rich and powerful
And have grown fat and sleek.
Their evil deeds have no limit;
They do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it,
They do not defend the rights of the poor." (Jeremiah 5:20-28)*

Amos 5:10-15

*You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain.
Therefore, though you have built mansions you will not live in them.*

Fourth, God wants us to take responsibility for our lives and community. Prof. Jesse Mugambi reminded us that human rights and freedom require responsibility.

We heard of God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. (Verse 1)

"Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you green plants, I now give you everything." (Verse 3)

It is noteworthy that it is only after the fall that God gives us everything to eat. In the Garden of Eden, we were vegetarians!

But the critical point is whether we are being responsible in the way we are "being fruitful". We have been so fruitful, we are threatening the rest of creation and our own survival. We heard the Minister talk about the high birth rate. Yesterday we went to a homestead. I counted 17 young children. Every young woman had a baby

on her back. We have extended life through modern medicine and hygiene. Is it right that we don't show responsibility in the number of children we bring into the world? How do we overcome this?

I ask, because the earth is finite. Already there are 6.5 billion humans, projected to rise to 9 billion. Is there enough water, land, trees, fish to support us all?

Fifth, and last, I would like us to consider Christian Aid's slogan:
"We believe in Life before death".

Many pastors will talk about getting people to heaven, but actually they are concerned about their condition in the here and now. What people do look for is the miraculous power of God. This last week-end a huge rally in Kampala with Benny Hinn demonstrated people's earning for divine assistance and healing in the here and now. The deaf want to hear.

But Jesus' feeding of the five thousand shows that if we are willing to offer ourselves and our resources, and to work together as community, we can bring healing and the affirmation of life in the here and now. After all, is this not what the Incarnation is all about? The Son of God came on earth to establish God's Kingdom in the here and now. Daily we pray "*Your will be done on earth, as it is already being done in heaven.*" God wants us to fulfil our full potential and be able to have life in all its fullness.

II. **Water presentation:** Allen Goddard: A River Runs Through: Water in God's Purpose for Creation

III. **Topics for Reflection and Discussion**

1. **Stewardship for creation – What does it mean to take on environmental responsibility in the context of the water crisis?**

I think the first thing we have to realize is that we must live in harmony with creation. There are universal laws which we need to follow, which all of creation follows. We humans are the ones who think we can behave as we want, without reference to God and God's creation.

The rest of creation has rights and all of creation is valued by God and should therefore be valued by us. Jurgen Moltman, the German theologian, in his *Theology of Creation*, says something to the effect that "To Nature, we are God". I find that pretty daunting!

Rather than seeing ourselves as Stewards of Creation, I would prefer to use the word "Keepers". We should see ourselves as "Earthkeepers".

But we have not been doing a good job! In South Africa, 35 years ago we planted Australian Wattle and now have a costly programme trying to remove it. We humans have a real problem in thinking we know better than God. Have we seen the earth as only for our benefit. Maybe a fundamental mistake has arisen from our interpretation of Genesis 1: 28:

God blessed them and said to them 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the grounds'.

Other translations have said "have dominion over".

Have we seen this as licence to exploit, abuse and use for our own benefit only, or do we see we have an intrinsic responsibility to care for, look after, nurture and keep for the future that which God has brought into being.

The key might be found in Genesis 2:15: *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* Other translations say "To till and keep it"

Remember what we read at the end of the creation story. Genesis 1:31:
"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

Remember too Genesis 9:11:

I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

The reality is that we are now in the midst of the Sixth Great Extinction. There have been five previous extinctions, millions of years ago. The big difference is that this time, we humans are causing it. Now there are some who ask why extinction or "biodiversity loss" are so critical. Apart from the fact that we are causing the extinction of what God has brought into being, and remember, "Extinction is forever", our survival is dependent on the diversity of creation. Extinction is the greatest threat to humanity. As an example, it is said that if all bees became extinct, we would only last about three years.

As we look at water, we must remember that water is an integral part of the natural environment and we must look after the totality of the natural environment if we are to survive and if we are to have clean water.

What can we do to prevent extinction?

It is a really difficult question. Our instinct is to look after our fellow human beings.

Yesterday we saw the need of people for the basic essentials of life. We heard that in all the report backs from the field trips.

But we have to realize that that our well-being is integrally linked with the well-being of the environment, and in fact, our lives are enriched by living in a healthy environment.

So,

- i) What can we do to be good Earthkeepers?
- ii) How can we live more harmoniously with creation?
- iii) How can we stem the sixth great extinction and encourage an attitude of respect for God's creation, learning not to kill?

1) A Theology of Creation

To address 'creation' is to be aware of the emergent universe and that this is integral to a sacred, creative and lifegiving process. From Genesis to current evolutionary theories, the emergent processes of life are inter-connected and divinely inspired, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It ALL matters. Creation theology has been neglected for centuries, until recently, as Christian traditions have over-emphasized the redemption of humanity and have almost forgotten about the tradition of creation.

Increasingly ecological theologians are reinterpreting creation theology in light of current evolutionary knowledge of the universe, the Earth and the ecological crisis. It is an urgent need to become aware, once again, of the sacred whole. This leads to insights about our part within the whole and not our superiority to it. Creation theology reminds us of our place within the scheme of life, enlarges our appreciation for all of life, and increases our awareness of being inter-connected to multitude modes of divine presence.

The World Council of Churches chose the theme Peace Justice and the Integrity of Creation as a galvanizing image to make connections between ecological and social issues. From an ecological viewpoint, 'integrity of creation' allows room for different theological and ecological paradigms - from stewardship to cosmological. Stewardship is both a biblical theme as well as a comfortable ecological paradigm for many Christians. The ecological crisis is understood predominantly a problem of resources, and responsible stewardship and resource management are appropriate responses. Theologically, stewardship is about caring for God's creation. Humanity joins with God as a co-creator, and jointly we care for creation. Stewardship is a light green paradigm, meaning that it maintains anthropocentrism. God's project remains human centered, and little intrinsic or sacred value is attached to the natural world. Stewardship mobilizes Christians to protect dwindling resources'. It does not challenge fundamental precepts of Christianity or of mainstream society.

A cosmological paradigm begins with the emergent universe, & considers the whole process of the emergence of the Earth & life on Earth. It is a dark green paradigm as it does not accept that the divine plan is only human-centered; rather it is about the whole. It is biblically sound, established within Christian traditions, and can motivate change. From creation theology one can see the many ways water can be appreciated: its ecological role in the whole Earth processes, its life-giving capacity, as a common good, and as constitutive of all creation.

2. God and the churches' care for the poor – What are the implications of water scarcity, privatization etc. with regard to justice for the poor?

God calls for justice and equity:

Jeremiah 5:20-28,

Exodus 16:16-18. God fed the Israelites with as much as they needed.

When talking of the poor, does that include the voiceless and powerless, and does that include all of creation, which does not have a vote and cannot speak out for itself? Some would argue that creation is beginning to make itself heard or felt with storms of increased severity.

Sean McDonagh in his book "*Dying for Water*" writes: "The challenges of the contemporary world call Christians to serve not just the poor or those exploited or oppressed and have no voice. It also calls us to protect this fragile, water planet – earth."

We must guard against the domination of commercial interests – serving mammon instead of God!

Aristotle said there were two economic systems: The need system and the greed system. He said it would be disastrous if we followed the greed system. What has the world followed?

There are essentials that God provides for his creation that cannot be subject to commercial domination. Water is one. Is it right to privatize water? How do we treat it as a valuable commodity if it does not have a price on it?

3. The symbolism of water for life – What are the theological and spiritual meanings of water based on the Bible and how do they relate to the situation today?

Read the Bible with green spectacles! You will find that the Bible is full of the wonders of creation.

Consider the following passages:

Genesis 1:2, 9-10

Now the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 2:6:

Streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.

Genesis 2:10: *A river watering the Garden flowed from Eden.*

Ezekiel 47:1-12 : This is a vision of fruitfulness, abundance, and extolling the healing and life-giving qualities of **clean** water.

The river flowed into the sea and made its waters wholesome. Wherever the river flows, all living creatures teeming in it will live...

Revelation 21:1-4 and 22:1-2:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Rev. 21:1-4, 22; 22:1-2)

John 4:10,13,14 – Living Water: The Samaritan woman: *He would have given you living water.*

Mark 1:4-5 – The Ministry of John the Baptist: *“they were baptised by him in the river Jordan”*

Water is seen as a source of Life in the Bible. How do I see it?

Since water has significant spiritual meaning, what can we do to help us treat water with greater respect and care – to value it?

4. Living our faith in communities – How should we address in our communities, our churches, our networks the different challenges posed by the water crisis?

How do we live out our faith in communities? Can we see this not only in terms of the Ecumenical Movement but Inter-faith? After all, we all, of whatever faith, breath the same air and drink the same water.

I would like to say that all attending this Water Conference should take on the prophetic role for the church. It is time we recognize that we must speak out for God. I think that we have been too polite in the past!

But let us not do it on our own. Let us work together with the other faiths in our communities, because we are all threatened.

I heard the case of Mabira Forest yesterday, where the whole community, including the churches, spoke out.

Should the Churches speak out about the drowning of the Bujagali Falls which I am told is a place of cultural and spiritual importance? I am also told that the economic viability of the multimillion dollar dam is highly suspect.

How do we prioritize scarce resources? God tells us to establish justice, not to rely on our armies. (Psalm 33:16-19).

*No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him...*

Is it right that nations spend valuable resources on armaments and so-called defence?

How can we say “No to war and armaments” and “Yes to community cooperation”?

A fraction of what the nations of the world spend on armaments would solve both environmental and MDGoals, including water. We are paying the price of our disobedience to God.

But it is not only controversial issues we should get involved in. There are many areas where we can co-operate in looking after and caring for our environment.

As a community we can do something about rubbish.

As communities we can do something to try to stop soil erosion.

Question: Should we be seeking to work ecumenically and with other religions, and should we be bolder in our prophetic role and our advocacy?

The Vision of the Southern African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute (SAFCEI) is “*Faith Communities committed to cherishing living earth*”.

Our common concern is environmental justice, each from the perspective of our own faith but experiencing a great sense of unity in our common pursuit to find ways to live sustainably and in harmony with all creation.

www.safcei.org.za; www.neccsa.org.za

4) Inter-religious Efforts.

The ecological crisis is calling forth a further consciousness and novel forms of inter-religious cooperation, and the emphasis is more on affecting public policy than on inter-religious exchange. The era of disparate and divided religious traditions needs to be over, if only to counter the rise in religious fundamentalism. While each religion has distinct contributions, common ground is necessary for the world to face such a global and intertwined crisis. The world's religions are being called upon to address the spiritual and moral dimension of the ecological crisis. This challenge is generating new and unique types of inter-religious co-operation. While taking many shapes, there are several characteristics that describe what is occurring. Three will be mentioned briefly.

A) Form:

The vision of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions has expanded, and now represents commitments to a just, peaceful and sustainable world. To do this, a basis of ecological integrity is a prerequisite. Their first axiom is: The Earth and all life are cherished, protected, healed and restored.

B) Content:

. In the face of the ecological crisis, religions are engaging in in-depth evaluations of those aspects that have promoted or ignored ecological ruin. The ingrained anthropocentrism of some traditions, especially the monotheistic religions, is difficult to budge, particularly as much of the theological paradigm is based on the superiority of the human. To shift our gaze from the primacy of humanity to unawareness of the whole of life within an evolutionary paradigm can be theologically & personally strenuous. Yet anything less will be inadequate. A religious world view in which the natural world is sacred & not secondary is what is required of religions today.

C) A calling forth of ethics rather than dogma

Given the rapid rate of ecological destruction and the uncertainty of a sustainable future, we need a substantial change in religious attitudes towards the natural world. The work of rethinking the relationship of humans to the Earth, & the implications for economic patterns, equity and life-style, are urgent tasks. For those working in the inter-religious arena there has been a shift towards ethics. The challenge is to develop ethics that are not only human centered. Theologians, drawing from the ethical core & codes of each tradition are reshaping these invaluable & necessary resources to include the natural world in ethical considerations (Rasmussen, 1996). This shift from dogma to ethics signifies a departure from both the content and the purpose of inter-religious cooperation. It orients the religious traditions to bring forth their greatest insights into a political arena, with the aim to influence action.

II) A River Runs Through: Water in God's Purpose for Creation

At the beginning, one river flows out of Eden, to become the watershed that cradles civilization (Gen 2:10-14). At the very end, a cosmic echo declares the invitation of the One who is called the Alpha and Omega, “ ‘Come!’ *Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life* (Rev.22:17 cf. 21:6).”^[1] From start to finish in Bible history fresh water bubbles, gushes, gurgles, flows, floods, rainbows the sky, or suddenly dries up. Then it pours out of God's upper chambers all over again, to nurture, sustain, wash, cleanse, baptize, heal, or tempest-toss the heroes and heroines of God's story, towards his good ending.

This discussion assumes that God's purpose for history, since his cherubim barred the gates to Eden, is to restore humanity, together with every other creature, to communion with himself, in a new creation. In meditation Scripture is voiced and heard in the rhythms of listening prayer, giving ample time for the Holy Spirit to evoke a deep emotional or even inexpressible response within.^[5] These ways of hearing God speak convince me of one missional theme in the Bible – the living God reveals himself and his reign to particular people at particular times so that through these chosen ones he can open the secret of his goal for creation - to reconcile every people in every age, *and* every living creature, into communion with himself (Acts 3:19-21).^[6] Clean drinking water is closely linked to this mystery of the Bible's theme of mission.