

# Cultivate and Care



**An Ecumenical Theology of Justice  
for and within Creation**

**World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order**



# Cultivate and Care

An Ecumenical Theology of Justice  
for and within Creation

Faith and Order Paper No. 226



World Council  
of Churches

Cultivate and Care

An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation

Faith and Order Paper No. 226

Copyright © 2020 WCC Publications. All rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced in English with full acknowledgment of the source. No part of the publication may be translated without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: [publications@wcc-coe.org](mailto:publications@wcc-coe.org).

*WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. Founded in 1948, the WCC promotes Christian unity in faith, witness, and service for a just and peaceful world. A global fellowship, the WCC brings together more than 380 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and other churches representing more than 560 million Christians in 120 countries and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church.*

*Opinions expressed in WCC Publications are those of the authors.*

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Cover photo: Albin Hillert/WCC

Cover design: Based on a design by Albin Hillert

Book design and typesetting: Beth Oberholtzer Design

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1738-6

World Council of Churches

150 Route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100

1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

<http://www.oikoumene.org>

# **Contents**

**I. Introduction 5**

**II. Urgent Environmental Concerns 6**

**III. Theological Perspectives 11**

a. Creation as a Theological Theme  
in the World Council of Churches 11

b. Relevant Theological Perspectives 14

**IV. Ecumenical Response Contributing to Visible Unity 19**

**V. Conclusion 26**



## I. Introduction

1. According to the Faith and Order document *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, Faith and Order*, “among the deplorable effects of injustice and violence, which have drastic effects especially upon people living in poverty and augur tragic consequences for future generations, [are] the degradation, objectification, exploitation, and commercialization of God’s creation.”<sup>1</sup> Addressing human behavior that is responsible for climate devastation constitutes not “merely one justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns,” but rather, as the Faith and Order Commission’s theological reflection on the churches’ pilgrimage of justice and peace states, one “of foundational importance for all existence and identity.”<sup>2</sup> Christian communities may not in conscience ignore this crisis and the pathos of a threatened creation. “If the churches are to be in pilgrimage together, it can only be in the context of journeying toward the unity of the church within creation.”<sup>3</sup> The situation demands that the churches’ journey toward visible unity must include a sustained dialogue with a theology for justice for and within creation, and seek ways to put the fruits of that dialogue into practice.

2. The Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), held in Busan, Korea, in 2013, registered widespread awareness among Christians of the threat to the environment and its cause in human irresponsibility: “Creation has been misused and we face threats to the balance of life, a growing ecological crisis and the effects of climate change.”<sup>4</sup> A 2014 interfaith statement on climate change, “Climate, Faith

---

1. *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, Faith and Order*, Faith and Order\_Paper No. 224 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), §24.

2. *Ibid.*, §22.

3. *Ibid.*, §25.

4. “God’s Gift and Call to Unity – And our Commitment,” Unity Statement adopted by the WCC 10th Assembly on 8 November 2013, §2, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/unity-statement>.

and Hope: Faith Traditions Together for a Common Future,” reiterated that assessment: “As representatives from different faith and religious traditions, we stand together to express deep concern for the consequences of climate change on the earth and its people, all entrusted, as our faiths reveal, to our common care. Climate change is indeed a threat to life, a precious gift we have received and that we need to care for.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. Urgent Environmental Concerns

3. At first glance, the issue of environmental justice may not seem to be divisive for the churches; however, if we regard the churches in their national and geographical contexts, dilemmas and divisive issues come to the fore. Ecological efforts often confront national, economic, and political interests. National and regional government decisions about climate justice are often shaped by the economic development interests of each nation or region. As a number of WCC studies linking poverty, wealth, and ecology have concluded: “The merciless mutilation of the Earth in search of profits [is] such that the productive and regenerative limits of the planet have now been overstepped.”<sup>6</sup> Justice in and for creation cannot be addressed separately from attention to the entanglement of ecology, economy, and cultural identity. We must remember

---

5. “Climate, Faith and Hope: Faith Traditions Together for a Common Future,” 11 December 2014, WCC, <http://fabc.org/offices/csec/Documents/Interfaith%20Summit%20on%20Climate%20Change-Final%20Statement.pdf>. For faith statements by many different Christian communities, see: <https://earthministry.org/faith-statements>; <https://fore.yale.edu/climate-change/statements-from-world-religions>.

6. See the Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) process launched at the 8th Assembly of the WCC in Harare in 1998, which continued to the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan. See also Rogate R. Mshana’s preface to Rogate R. Mshana and Athena Peralta, eds., *Economy of Life: Linking Poverty, Wealth and Ecology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013). Related study processes and consultations on poverty, wealth and ecology were organized from 2007 to 2013 by the WCC Poverty, Wealth and Ecology (PWE) project.



that when if we sacrifice ecology for economic gain and national or cultural prestige, we will eventually lose everything.

4. The struggle for survival that is told in Naomi's response to the demise of her family due to famine and their emigration to the country of Moab (Ruth 1:1–5) continues throughout the world today among indigenous communities, subsistence farmers, women, the poor, and the most vulnerable. It is imperative for us to care about the hardships that our brothers and sisters bear, and that even other creatures bear in silence. Every society throughout the world has people who struggle to find food, clothing, land for farming, justice, security, shelter, education, health care, employment, and peace. The protection of the vulnerable – the orphan, the stranger, and the widow, in biblical language – is a measure of our humanity in God's image, and is, therefore, a constitutive element of mission in Christ's way of discipleship.<sup>7</sup>

5. The Apostle Paul described the whole creation as waiting in longing and hope for fulfillment (Rom. 8:22). The groaning of creation is experienced in human yearning for freedom and happiness. However, the human struggle for fulfillment often becomes a determination to win, pursued through different and often competing interests. Most of the time, it is the weakest and the poorest among us who will sacrifice and even be sacrificed for the comfort of others, in the name of development and nationalism. For example, investors coming to underdeveloped countries are sometimes received with both hopefulness and cynicism. Some of them indeed improve the life of many, but some would just leave the land barren and the people poorer than before. The protection of the environment is not only a question of choosing to care for the earth by sacrificing one's own comfort, but also a ques-

---

7. See Risto Jukko and Jooseop Keum, eds., *Moving in the Spirit, Report of the World Council of Churches Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, 8–13 March 2018, Arusha, Tanzania* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019).

tion about who has to make such a sacrifice. Sometimes local churches are faced with the dilemma of choosing between economic welfare for the indigenous and local people versus the conservation of nature. Can we find a way to achieve both values?

6. Justice for creation should not be pitted against the basic needs of people living in situations of famine and scarcity, or who become refugees due to war and other dire political and economic situations. Our reflections on justice “for creation” should run parallel with reflection on justice “in the healing of creation.” Older models of the relationship of human beings to creation often assumed inexhaustible resources; moreover, benefits were not equally distributed. The present climate devastation affects everyone, and it affects the most vulnerable among us first and most of all. Those who already had the least benefits are now often forced to bear the largest share of the catastrophic consequences of climate transition while continuing to suffer basic-needs scarcity. Genesis 3:1–23 predicts a life of struggle as punishment for sin, but more often than not, those who suffer most from the abuse of the environment are not the ones responsible for the sin of that abuse.

7. In this context, the understanding of our unity should be greater than ever. The churches should not only see themselves as one body of Christ – where one suffers, the other will suffer as well – but also as part of one whole creation, which is the work of God and where the Holy Spirit is still at work within and through us. Are the vulnerable and the poorest who suffer in the disruption of the integrity of creation bearing a cross for the wrongdoings of others? Suffering due to the abuse of the environment should not only be seen as a stimulus for charity or solidarity, but as a call for the transformation of mind, will, and lifestyle.

8. Clearly environmental issues affect people very differently. Some face the loss of their traditional cultures, livelihoods, and homes. The unfair distribution of God’s resources has resulted in and continues to result in

an unacceptable standard of living for many and in mass migration of people looking for better lives in other countries. Such a calamitous situation drives people away from their land as refugees. Amidst the waves of migration and arrival of refugees, the idea of preservation of nation, group, or civilization, and of traditional cultural values sometimes takes the form of reciprocal xenophobia. Moreover, not only does the exploitation of nature become reason for war and interreligious conflict; war and conflict cause environmental devastation. The promotion of environmental justice is inseparably related to the promotion of peace. The churches must listen to the voices, within and beyond the Church, of those who suffer most from the destruction of the earth and commit themselves to offer a meaningful response to their plight.

9. We start with confessing that we, as individuals and as churches, have failed to fulfill our responsibility as human beings, as part of God's creation, and to future generations. Human beings are guilty not only of interfering in a creation that is not theirs, but also of making changes that threaten devastation of the good environment that God created and entrusted to the care of humankind. At times, the Bible has been used to justify this interference and the domination of the earth. The human fall into sin began with the desire to be like God, to have power and control like God. That desire turned into ambition that has become our downfall, and as we fell, we took the whole of creation down with us.<sup>8</sup> Our selfishness, greed, corruption, and rebellion grew. We have become "skilled in doing evil, but know not how to do good," as the prophet Jeremiah said of his own people (Jer. 4:22). We must repent.

---

8. While recent church leaders have stressed that abuse of the environment is a sin, the damage caused to creation by sin has long been recognized by our Christian forebears. See, for example, Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Treatise*, 1, 2, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 122 (Paris, 1966), 191, 195.

10. The effects of human sinfulness have been multiplied greatly in the time of modernization and rapid technological change. Invention and discovery have given human beings more power and control over nature than before. The possibility of having comfort for oneself at the expense of the earth and other living beings wins over the willingness to sacrifice one's comfort. Mass production has enabled the increase of human greed for more, bigger, faster, and cheaper products. Modernization and globalization together have greatly increased competition among nations and groups. A fear of losing the competitive edge with other nations in innovation, production, and commerce can make ethical decisions in favor of protecting the environment more difficult. In addition, the fear of falling behind other countries in population size diminishes the willingness to recognize that the earth has its limits in producing food for everyone. Sometimes food production has been engineered heedlessly, resulting in animal cruelty and endangered human health.

11. We must not forget that human beings are also creatures, interconnected with the rest of creation and with the earth itself. When, for our own gain, we neglect the earth and the well-being of other living beings, we will eventually also reap the consequences. The rising of global temperatures, contaminated water, polluted air, and the extinction of some species: in one way or another, these will affect our lives, sooner or later. Jeremiah teaches his people to mourn for the land and for fellow creatures: "Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone" (Jer. 9:10). Our willingness to change and sacrifice, so deeply a part of the penitential and ascetic practices of the traditions of so many of our churches, causes us to lament and could provide a beginning for healing.

12. This situation invites us to acknowledge the intrinsic value of every human being and of all creation; human beings deserve to be valued in

themselves, not simply to the extent that they can be of use for others. The dignity that comes from being created in God's image and from being loved by God belongs no less to persons who are marginalized, deprived of their livelihood, or made more vulnerable because of the effects of environmental degradation. This dignity belongs also to those who are marginalized for reasons of health and productivity, such as people with disabilities or those who are advanced in age. All parts of God's creation, every person and every creature, have an intrinsic value which should be appreciated, respected, and protected.

13. The psalmist proclaims, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it" (Ps. 24:1). The Bible emphasizes God's unceasing concern for the poor and the vulnerable (see, for example, Ps. 113:7; Job 30:25). God takes a keen interest in the affairs of the world, especially in the plight and the well-being of those in need. Gospel discipleship begins with those who are struggling to achieve a dignified life. Their grassroots struggle for justice for and within creation is where the Church's pilgrimage toward unity within creation must begin.

### **III. Theological Perspectives**

#### ***a. Creation as a Theological Theme in the World Council of Churches***

14. The doctrine of creation was not always a central theological theme in the ecumenical movement. It was not considered to be a matter that divided the churches.<sup>9</sup> A concern with creation remained in the background, but attention was focused on understanding Christ and the gospel, and on salvation, the Church, and the visible unity of the Church.

---

9. See Lukas Vischer, "The Theme of Humanity and Creation in the Ecumenical Movement," 1993, [www.jaysquare.com/resources/growthdocs/grow10.htm](http://www.jaysquare.com/resources/growthdocs/grow10.htm).

15. The theme of the 1961 WCC assembly in New Delhi, “Jesus Christ – the Light of the World,” was interpreted in light of Colossians 1:15–20, thus reinterpreting creation and redemption in a cosmic key: “The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and wrath of God.”<sup>10</sup> Following the assembly, the Commission on Faith and Order developed the study, “God in Nature and History,” to consider whether theological reflection on the relation between creation and redemption belonged within the subject of church unity.<sup>11</sup> The study observed that “nature is not so much the realm where God is revealed to man, as the realm in which man, created in God’s image, has to realize God’s purpose for his creation.”<sup>12</sup> Human beings are part of nature and history, and they guide and transform history and nature – in modern times more than ever. But they must not forget that the meaning of nature “surpasses” human understanding: “The pedestrian way in which the Enlightenment tried to prove that all phenomena in nature are there for man and for man only, has served to prove just the opposite. The very fact that so many phenomena are meaningless and incomprehensible to mankind, is extremely meaningful, in so far as it teaches him the limits of his knowledge and task.”<sup>13</sup> The study concluded: “To take seriously the final events in Christ, must also mean that he is confessed as the ultimate secret of creation. The key to the understanding of history must at the same time be the key to the understanding of creation, since both are essentially one.”<sup>14</sup>

16. The Vancouver assembly of the WCC in 1983 called the churches to make a common commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of

---

10. Joseph Sittler, “Called to Unity,” *Ecumenical Review* 14 (January 1962), 186.

11. “God in Nature and History,” in *New Directions in Faith and Order, Bristol 1967*, Faith and Order Paper No. 50 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1968), 7–31.

12. *Ibid.*, 9.

13. *Ibid.*, 18.

14. *Ibid.*, 12.

creation. One commentator explained that these three elements were viewed as “three aspects of one reality: as a single vision towards which we work and as three entry points into a common struggle in these areas.” The newly added term, “integrity of creation,” which alluded to the threat to the environment, both helped to clarify “the biblical vision of peace with justice” and also “gave a new prominence to the doctrine of creation and the opportunity to re-affirm our Trinitarian faith, beginning with God as Creator and therefore also Liberator and Sustainer.”<sup>15</sup> The Canberra assembly of the WCC in 1991 met under the theme “Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation!” and expressed the wish that work on the theology of creation should become one of the main thematic concerns of the WCC.

17. The connections between justice, peace, and integrity of creation<sup>16</sup> have subsequently been elaborated through the WCC’s work on eco-justice. “Eco” comes from the Greek *oikos* or “house,” and suggests connections between economy, ecology, and ecumenism. Understood theologically as the household of life, *oikoumene* is Christological and, especially, trinitarian and relational.<sup>17</sup> It shifts the ecumenical focus from a static understanding of church unity to a more dynamic, comprehensive, and relational notion of Christian *koinonia* – a central notion in the Faith and Order convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.<sup>18</sup> The term *oikoumene* is better equipped to make sense of cultural and religious diversity and pluralism. Moreover, according to the programme on eco-justice: “In linking environmental and social justice

---

15. D. Preman Niles, “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation,” <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/dictionary-article11.html>.

16. See D.P. Niles, ed., *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: Documents from an Ecumenical Process of Commitment* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994).

17. Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996).

18. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

issues the environmental justice approach, ‘eco-justice’ in short, challenges both humanity’s destruction of the earth and the abuse of economic and political power which result in poor people having to suffer the effects of environmental damage.”<sup>19</sup> Theologically, this vision of *oikoumene* affirms creation as an organic, interdependent, coherent, and comprehensive whole, in contrast to dualistic, anthropocentric, androcentric, and hierarchical views of life.

### ***b. Relevant Theological Perspectives***

18. Christians are motivated to act on behalf of justice for and within creation because of their faith in the revelation made known in Jesus Christ, “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible” (Col. 1:16). What does it mean to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed amidst the crisis and pathos of a threatened creation? Because Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15), in whom everything will be reconciled, the Church’s primary mission of proclamation calls Christians to cry out, lamenting and denouncing the trends which are threatening to destroy the environment. Creation was meant to be shared by all people; the wanton and selfish destruction of creation unjustly affects human beings today as well as future generations, and also nature itself.<sup>20</sup>

19. We believe that the universe was freely created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) out of the benevolence of God and that “God saw everything that he had made, and, indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The

---

19. “The WCC and eco-justice,” <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/eco-justice>. See also the WCC’s AGAPE Process and the PWE Project.

20. On the challenges to children posed by climate devastation, see *Unless We Act Now: The Impact of Climate Change on Children* (UNICEF, November 2015); and also: “Resources and tools available for the implementation of Churches’ Commitments to Children, 21 June 2017, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness/rights-of-children/resources-available-to-support-member-churches-in-the-implementation-of-each-principle>.



Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, formulated in the first two ecumenical councils (325 and 381) and professed in our own time by many Christian communities during their worship services, repeats this biblical teaching that God created all things in heaven and on earth. Thus the intrinsic value of creation and all creatures derives from God, not from their usefulness to humanity. Of course, it is undeniable that some aspects of nature (such as illnesses and some physical conditions) as well as “natural” disasters (such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and forest fires) can raise questions of the presence of evil in the natural world and of the fallenness of creation. Christians along with believers of other religions have grappled with these difficult questions with various degrees of success. Ultimately, biblical faith in the irrepressible coming of the reign of God, as promised by Christ and expressed in the vivid imagery of the book of Revelation, trusts that the positive overcoming of evil ultimately will be achieved by the power of God at the end of time.

20. The Bible attributes the abundant variety within creation to God (Gen.1:11–12; 20–21) and teaches that human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, have been entrusted with the task of caring for and cultivating the earthly garden (Gen 1:26–27; 2:15). To “cultivate and care” involves protection of biodiversity and of cultural traditions. The rich variety in creation forms an integral whole – all is interdependent. As one of the Fathers of the Church, Maximus the Confessor, writes: “For God who made and brought into existence all things by his infinite power, contains, gathers, and limits them and in his providence binds both intelligible and sensible beings to himself and to one another,” being the “cause, principle, and end of all, the creation and beginning of all things and eternal ground of the circuit of things.”<sup>21</sup> Such interrelatedness helps to explain why unjust human actions inevitably have a negative effect on the environment in which they live.

---

21. Maximus the Confessor, “The Church’s Mystagogy,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 186–87.

21. Human beings were intended to live with God, with one another, and with the world. Tragically, already at the beginning of history, as it were, humankind rejected God's design for creation and thereby destroyed its original integrity. This resulted not only in alienation from God, from self, and from one another, but also in the earth's rebellion against human beings (Gen. 3:17–19). Creation became subject to futility, groaning to be set free from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:20–21).<sup>22</sup> In our own time, the emergence of the environmental crisis demonstrates the alarming proportions of the damaging effect of sin upon creation. The widespread destruction of the environment has as its cause the unjust and indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology for the sake of a privileged few, who squander and waste the earth's limited resources, thus depriving others as well as future generations. As such, the ecological crisis is not merely a technological, economic, or political crisis. Most importantly, it is a profoundly moral crisis. Without moral and spiritual conversion, no lasting change is possible.

22. The incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity (John 1:14) and the salvation which Jesus achieved through his death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3–5) have assured the ultimate victory of Christ, who, with the definitive arrival of the kingdom at the end of time, will hand over all things to the Father “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). This design of God unfolds within the vast framework that runs from the creation of the universe to its consummation in the new heaven and new earth. This is the story that runs from the first to

---

22. Maximus the Confessor, in *Ambigua* 7, states that, by his sin, Adam chose to be drawn down to earth by his own free choice, looking at nature with passion (the tree of good and evil being “good for food” and a “delight for the eyes”), thus cutting himself off from the happy end that God had planned for him. As such, Adam lowered himself and the rest of creation to the level of being a means to satisfy his selfish desires. For an English translation, see *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 67.

the last pages of the holy scripture. However, our assurance about the ultimate realization of God's design for creation does not imply the removal of the trials and tragedies that must be endured before that final victory. The central event in the Father's plan of salvation – the paschal mystery of the Son and the breathing out of the Spirit – bears witness to this. Jesus' offering of his life on the cross expresses God's solidarity with all who suffer and culminates the movement of the Creator toward all creation. This movement calls for a Church of the cross, whose compassion extends to all God's most vulnerable creatures.

23. The promise of a new heaven and a new earth, as foretold in the book of Revelation 21, is in no way a negation of the goodness, value, and beauty of the world that God created in the beginning, nor of our duty to respect and care for that original blessing. Rich oral traditions have seen creation as the first act of God's revelation. Other Christians have regarded creation as a second book alongside the scriptures, which reveals something of the greatness of its author (see Rom 1:20). As a divinely written icon, creation is an intricately crafted window leading to knowledge and praise of God. As St. Basil wrote: "By the beauty of visible things let us raise ourselves to Him who is above all beauty; by the grandeur of bodies, sensible and limited in their nature, let us conceive of the infinite Being whose immensity and omnipotence surpass all the efforts of the imagination."<sup>23</sup>

24. Not only can creation invite us to turn our thoughts to God, but the New Testament itself shows God making use of the humble material elements of the earth to enter into communion with us, such as in the bread and wine used in our celebration of the Lord's supper (see, for example,

---

23. Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron*, Homily 1, 11. See also the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which taught that icons or sacred images, fashioned from the elements of creation, can serve as a means of entering into communion with God and the saints whom they represent.

1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23–26), in the water of baptism (John 3:5), or in the oil used during prayerful intercession for those who are ill (James 5:14–15). “The Church in each Divine Liturgy continues this . . . offering (of creation to God), in the form of the Bread and the Wine which are elements taken from the material universe. In this way the Church continuously declares that man is destined not to exercise power over creation as if he were the owner of it, but to act as its steward, cultivating it in love and referring it in thankfulness with respect and reverence to its Creator.”<sup>24</sup>

25. Those saved through a baptism of new birth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) and who make up the Church are called to share in a ministry of reconciliation, serving the work by which “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). Justice for creation is only possible when human beings return (*metanoia*) to their calling within creation to care and reconcile, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to receive creation as a divine gift, referring it back to the giver with thankfulness. As the churches together promote this conversion they will come to see that their own division betrays the reconciliation at the heart of God’s plan for creation. This awareness and common action to protect the environment can inspire them to take further steps toward ecclesial reconciliation.

26. The Father was pleased through Christ “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). In Jesus we find the guarantee and sure source of hope for the salvation of human beings and for the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan for creation. Faith in Jesus Christ produces perseverance and hope, a hope which will not disappoint “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom.

---

24. The Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios (1973–1991), in his inauguration of a Day of Prayer for the Protection of the Environment, 9 January 1989, <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/message-by-h-a-h-ecumenical-patriarch-dimitrios-upon-the-day-of-prayer-for-the-protection-of-creation-01-09-1989->.

5:4–5). Efforts to protect the environment are an act of obedience to and cooperation with God’s saving will: “as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10).<sup>25</sup>

27. But Christian hope would be wrongly understood were one to think that certainty about Christ’s cosmic victory at the end of time in the full realization of the kingdom of God dispenses us from lamenting what may already be irreparable damage to creation caused by human selfishness or absolves us from serious concern about addressing current challenges to our environment. Our hope as Christians must not lead to passivity and complacency. Faith must be lived out in action; it is a faith that works through love (Gal. 5:6). Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit are called to embrace their responsibility to care for creation (their common house, or *oikos*). The Church has to cultivate and foster gospel values such as love, justice, and temperance, so that the faithful can effectively promote care for creation, both in their own lives as well as in their advocacy before economic and political powers. The Church’s role is to teach, witness to, and work for the transformation of the passions, attitudes, and activities that have been so disastrously and unjustly harmful to the environment.

#### **IV. Ecumenical Response Contributing to Visible Unity**

28. In the previous sections, we have seen the urgency of the environmental crisis as caused by exploitative human behavior and that Christian faith, many shared theological convictions, and our shared

---

25. See Irenaeus of Lyons on salvation history as leading to the recapitulation of all things in Christ, as affirmed in Ephesians 1:10: for example, *Adversus haereses* I, 10, 1; III, 16, 6; III, 21, 10; V, 20, 2; and V, 21, 1–2. See also Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 7, 2, and *Ad Thalassium* 60.

humanity demand response and responsibility from churches and individuals. We now offer some further reflections about such a response, as well as how it can contribute to growth toward that visible unity of the Church, which the WCC has set as its principal goal. This complex situation involves economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions and, therefore, a realistic response must take into account this complexity.

29. The Christian community has a responsibility to serve God's healing, reconciling activity in the world.<sup>26</sup> Our shared convictions impel us, precisely as Christian communities, to engage in the WCC's pilgrimage of justice and peace and to marshal such engagement as an effective path toward greater unity not only of the churches, but also of the whole created cosmos. Taken together, our communities are potentially a tremendously significant agent in promoting environmental justice and are called to grow in this role, so as to more fully respond to Christ's call that they be "light of the world" and "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13-14). Such an influence in public life is possible precisely because, in their essential nature, our churches are communities of formation in and practice of Christian discipleship. In each church, the word of God is proclaimed, people are called to faith and conversion, their new life in Christ is celebrated in worship, lifelong formation is provided in gospel values, and a life of active discipleship is fostered.

30. Christian formation needs to foster new ways of looking at the relation between human beings with God and with God's creation. At times, a misguided anthropocentrism – that is, a view that places human beings at the center of created reality – has led to the attitude that humans are free to do with nature whatever they want. While it is true that the Bible affirms the special place of human beings within creation, giving them the role of naming the other creatures and caring for the garden of creation, this position should not be misinterpreted as a license to exploit

---

26. See *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, chapters 4 and 5.

or destroy nature. Domination and mastery must give way to interrelation and care. This ecological reorientation may require a change in mentality and the cultivation of virtues such as humility, temperance, justice, mercy, and love, which lead Christians to recognize that the goal of creation is the glory of God, not the glory of human beings. A more contemplative view of the goodness and interrelation of all creatures reflects that wisdom that is promoted in the scriptures (see, for example, Ps. 104, Prov. 8:22–31, and Col. 1:15–20).

31. Such formation within our churches needs also to challenge the views of progress and fulfillment that have governed economic and cultural life since the industrial revolution. The devastation of the environment has demonstrated that progress does not mean unlimited technological and industrial advance in search of ever-increasing profits. True progress needs to be seen in terms of what serves the integral development, life, and dignity of human beings, and their proper place within God’s creation. Progress does not mean unlimited economic expansion but rather developments that contribute to an improved environment and a better quality of life.

32. Christian formation needs also to unmask the falsity of consumerism, which might be seen as the psychological “pollution” at the root of so much environmental degradation. True happiness, according to Christian faith, is not to be found in an unlimited increase of possessions but in being in spiritual harmony with God. Such harmony will often call for setting limits on our consumption and so help to diminish that self-centered culture of instant gratification which plagues our societies today. Such a formation can encourage a lifestyle that can contribute to the healing of the environmental degradation that is not already irreversible.<sup>27</sup>

---

27. The Christian ascetic tradition can offer inspiration and guidance for a lifestyle which sheds light upon the earth. For helpful reflections, see Symeon the New Theologian, “Discourse XI: On Fasting” and “Discourse XII: Of Abstinence and Endurance,” in *The Discourses* (New York, 1980), 167–180.

33. Christian ecological formation begins already in the setting of the family, and must continue throughout life: for example, in programs of ongoing study and reflection. Liturgical worship is one of the most frequent occasions in which the Christian community offers praise to God for God's majesty and gifts to us. Proclamation and preaching can provide occasions to reaffirm the truth that respect and care for the environment are important aspects of the thanksgiving we owe to the Lord. An insistence on the ecological responsibility called for in Christian discipleship is particularly significant in the training of church leaders, seminarians, and other pastoral ministers. Some global Christian communions already provide guidance and encouragement for ecological activity within their member churches throughout the world. Could they not learn from one another and also increase their collaboration in promoting environmental justice as a way of participating in the WCC's pilgrimage of justice and peace?

34. But, important as it is, ecological formation is not enough. The churches are called to follow the example set in the scriptures by recognizing that human sin, individual and collective, takes its toll on the environment, and must be exposed and denounced. The prophet Jeremiah denounced the damages wrought by his people: "Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through?" (Jer 9:12). And the prophet Hosea observed: "Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish: together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hos. 4:3). Their laments led to a call for repentance. This recognition of sin amidst the reality of ecological devastation must lead to action to promote structural change within our communities and in the public forum. In addition, all churches can strongly encourage their members to participate in prayer offered throughout the world each year during the Day of Prayer



for the Protection of the Environment.<sup>28</sup> Indigenous peoples' observation of Earth Day – with its practices of restricting the consumption of meat, fishing, and hunting, and practices of peacemaking and reconnecting with the earth – can be reintegrated into action for environmental protection and thus bear new theological meaning.

35. Some changes are called for within our churches themselves, wherever they are complicit in the abuse of the environment by inaction or by squandering natural resources; and also wherever their theologies have fostered disregard of interrelationship and interdependence with creation or have failed to uphold its integrity and tend to its flourishing. Congregations can and have taken significant steps to evaluate their ecological impact and to reduce any harmful effects. In addition, local, regional, and ecumenical groupings of communities need to find ways to collaborate and join forces in ecological initiatives, such as the use of various forms of energy. Groupings of various Christian communities are in a position to assess the environmental needs of their particular region, play their own part in protecting creation, and call upon local political and economic authorities to make the changes that their local situation requires.

36. Since the devastation of the environment is affecting the entire globe, it calls for global consensus and commitment. Many Christians play significant roles in finance, industry, and political life; they need to bring the values sketched out above into the public square where they can be heard and acted upon. For example, goals need to be set for “planning a sustainable and diversified agriculture, developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy, encouraging a more efficient use of energy, promoting a better management of marine and forest resources, and

---

28. Since 1989, this initiative has been led by many Orthodox churches and has been endorsed subsequently by the WCC and by the Roman Catholic Church.

ensuring universal access to drinking water.”<sup>29</sup> Similar forms of advocacy for environmental justice by Christian communities – also in collaboration with leaders and adherents of other religions – at regional, national, and local levels have been made.<sup>30</sup> For example, the WCC has been and should continue to be actively engaged with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its various Conferences of the Parties (COPs).<sup>31</sup>

37. The vast global challenge represented by the environmental crisis caused by global warming should not lead to a loss of hope. Important and effective steps can be taken to change the situation. Many initiatives for the promotion of environmental justice have been and are being undertaken throughout the world.<sup>32</sup> Such stories have also been documented about efforts of local Christian congregations.<sup>33</sup> A number of

---

29. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, “On Care for our Common Home,” 24 May 2015, §164. Some important advances have been made, such as the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the 2012 Conference of the United Nations on Sustainable Development, “Rio+20.” The important “Statement of Faith and Spiritual Leaders on the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP21 in Paris in December 2015” encouraged the positive outcome of that important meeting. See <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/diakonia/climate-change/statement-from-religious-leaders-for-the-upcoming-cop21>; also in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 68, no. 1, March 2016, 127–136.

30. “Climate, Faith and Hope: Faith Traditions Together for a Common Future,” 23 September 2014, <http://track0.org/2014/09/climate-faith-and-hope-faith-traditions-together-for-a-common-future>.

31. See the “Statement on COP 24 and Just Transition to Sustainable Economy,” 7 November 2018, World Council of Churches Executive Committee, Uppsala, Sweden, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/upsala-november-2018/statement-on-cop-24-and-just-transition-to-sustainable-economy>.

32. See, importantly, the work of the WCC on economic and ecological justice as presented in Norman Tendis, ed., *Roadmap for Congregations, Communities, and Churches for an Economy of Life and Ecological Justice* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2019).

33. See, for example, a study from the University of Edinburgh about the environmental initiatives of three church projects in Scotland: “Faith-based Climate Action in Christian Congregations: Mobilisation and Spiritual Resources,” <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13549839.2018.1449822>.

internet sites are devoted to encouraging environmental protection and documenting various ecological achievements, witnessing to the fact that efforts to collaborate in caring for the earth, motivated precisely out of faith in God the creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, can constitute a pilgrimage of hope and joy.<sup>34</sup> Such a journey can also increase our sense of being one in Christ and move us to take further steps toward that unity for which Jesus prayed.

38. Action on behalf of environmental justice is a value in itself; it is incumbent upon all human beings, whether they are Christians or not, followers of other religions, or of none. The ecological crisis is a human crisis that has and will continue to affect all of us, regardless of our religious convictions. Nevertheless, as we have tried to briefly express in this reflection, Christian faith affirms both that the universe is God's good creation and that the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, that is, the community of the Church, is called by God to care for that creation which will one day be recapitulated in Christ, as in Ephesians 1:10, and presented to the Father in the eschatological kingdom inaugurated by Christ's incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection. These theological and ecclesiological foundations for Christian involvement in protecting the environment also imply have ecumenical consequences. Christian efforts for the reconciliation of human beings with God and with creation would be hypocritical as long as the churches acquiesce serenely in their state of division. Such division too, just as the abuse of creation, is contrary to the will of our Lord. We firmly agree with the affirmation of the Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly of the WCC: "As prophetic sign the Church's vocation is to show forth the life that God wills for the whole creation. We are hardly a credible sign as

---

34. See, for example: WCC, "Care for creation and climate justice," <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change>; "Living the Change," <https://livingthechange.net>, <https://greenfaith.org>; and "Global Catholic Climate Movement," <https://catholicclimatemovement.global>.

long as our ecclesial divisions, which spring from fundamental disagreements in faith, remain. . . . Only as Christians are being reconciled and renewed by God's Spirit will the Church bear authentic witness to the possibility of reconciled life for all people, for all creation."<sup>35</sup>

## V. Conclusion

39. The Faith and Order document *Come and See* affirms the importance of a theology of justice within and for creation in our journey toward the visible unity of the Church. "The care or abuse of God's earth and its resources is not merely one justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns. Rather, reverence for God's creation is of foundational importance for all existence and identity. . . . Justice . . . is how we as humans and as Christians live in the web of life in reciprocity with all human beings, other creatures, and the rest of creation. In anticipation of the fullness of the reign of God, all of creation groans because of the threats to justice and well-being – threats that are especially present among marginalized communities and endangered environments."<sup>36</sup>

40. The present text, *Cultivate and Care* (see Gen. 2:15), seeks to demonstrate how a committed response to the environmental devastation of our time can be motivated by Christian faith in God the creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. We have sought, first, to point to some of the urgent environmental situations that cry out for Christian reflection and action. Next, we have sought to root such a response in the progressively increasing ecumenical consideration of creation on the part of the WCC in recent decades and in various theological, ecclesiological, and ecumenical convictions which our churches share and which call them to join together in engagement to protect the environment. Finally, we have proposed ways in which such an engagement can take form.

---

35. Unity Statement, §11.

36. *Come and See*, §22.

41. The present text focuses on what our faith tells us about the dignity which God has bestowed upon us in relation to creation. The Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly of the WCC pointed out: “As we read the Scriptures together, under the guidance of the Spirit, our eyes are opened to the place of the community of God’s people within creation. Men and women are created in the image and likeness of God and given the responsibility to care for life (Gen. 1:27–28).”<sup>37</sup> Journeying together as pilgrims seeking to respond to God’s call, our churches can not only be effective agents for change but also, through that very mutual collaboration, move closer to that unity for which their Lord and Master prayed.

42. Perhaps the best way to conclude this reflection would be to quote and join in the prayer that concludes the Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly of the WCC: “We turn to God, the source of all life, and we pray: O God of life, lead us to justice and peace, that suffering people may discover hope; the scarred world find healing; and divided churches become visibly one, through the one who prayed for us, and in whom we are one Body, your Son, Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit, is worthy to be praised, one God, now and forever. Amen.”<sup>38</sup>

---

37. Unity Statement, §6.

38. *Ibid.*, §16.







## World Council of Churches

Postal address:  
P.O. Box 2100  
CH-1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland

Tel: (+41 22) 791 6111  
Fax: (+41 22) 791 0361

[www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org)

Visiting address:  
150 Route de Ferney  
Grand-Saconnex (Geneva)  
Switzerland

Religion



9 782825 417386