



Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice By Roger A. Willer

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*Page numbers in the social statement are given throughout this article in parenthesis.

This ELCA social statement and accompanying study guide are available for free download at www.elca.org/socialstatements. You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

Why should you and I care about the earth? Most people would probably answer: “Well, because human society will suffer if we do not,” or, “Because we owe it to our children and grandchildren to leave them a healthy planet.”

These are good and important reasons! However, the ELCA social statement on the environment, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, gives a different, bigger, and perhaps surprising answer. It tells us that we should care about the rest of creation because that is our job—this is why God creates us. It also insists that the Bible tells us that caring for creation is a matter of justice and a deeply spiritual matter. (p. 8)*

The social statement is like that—clear, pithy, and constructively challenging. This article reviews some of its key points but the most important message is: Take the time to read it for yourself, bearing in mind recent situations reported in the news. This statement is shorter than most, easy to read, and contains lots to make a Christian reflect in fresh ways about the environment and our special responsibility to it. While the statement was adopted by the churchwide assembly in 1991, it remains timely and relevant today.

The first section, The Church’s Vision of Creation, makes the Nicene Creed’s point that God is fully involved in creating. It reminds us that Jesus Christ is the one “through whom all things were made” and that Christians confess that “the Holy Spirit is the Lord, the giver of life.” God is still creating today and the whole creation was and is good, even without humankind on the scene (p. 2).

Human beings are made to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. This is what it means to be made in the image of God (p. 2). When Genesis speaks about human dominion (Genesis 1:26), it does not mean we have a special privilege to exploit the earth for ourselves, but a special responsibility to serve and keep the earth for the good of all. Human beings are made to imitate the way God keeps and cares for us, as a servant king (Philippians 2:7). Moreover, we are to order human activity according to God's wisdom in creation, something that science and technology can help us discover (p. 3).

The next section, The Urgency, describes the fundamental problem of the environmental crisis: "Our sin and captivity lie at the roots of the current crisis" (p. 3). In our captivity to sin, we human beings exploit the earth as if it is a boundless warehouse. Two problems in particular jeopardize efforts to achieve a sustainable future for all of nature:

- Excessive consumption; and
- Relentless growth of the human population; this is a problem that springs from and is intensified by social injustice in the form of poor education, lack of

employment, poor health care, and equal rights (p. 4).

The environmental problem is worsened because each kind of environmental degradation feeds on others, magnifying them into a crisis threatening the whole earth. The section concludes by warning that the time for changing course "is very short" (p. 5), as recent scientific reports on climate change remind us.

Many people may find such dire predictions and problems overwhelming. But Christians live in hope. Even when the prospects for improvement look bleak, we proclaim that God addresses our predicaments with the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, and that God empowers us to be loving servants who act. We are not captives of sin, but become "captives of hope" (Zechariah 9:11-12). How we should act is guided by justice.

By justice? Yes, the section entitled The Hope and the Call to Justice identifies four principles of justice that we are called to live out in the face of the intricate complexities of the created order and the social order (pp. 6, 7):

- *Participation*—God's covenant with all living things (Genesis

9:12-17, Hosea 2:18) means that animals and the land are entitled to have their just interests considered when decisions are made regarding resources. Human beings should be advocates for the non-human parts of creation.

- *Solidarity*—the fact that God is the creator of all leads us to acknowledge our interdependence with all other creatures. We are to act both locally and globally on behalf of all creation, especially for those members that are at greatest risk.
- *Sufficiency*—God's Spirit is actively creating every moment and so we know there is enough to meet the needs of all creatures. Because the world is finite, though, this has implications for human population growth, acquisition and consumption.
- *Sustainability*—God intends for creation to last a long time, until the day of Jesus Christ. In the meantime humankind must strive toward an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.

Guided by these four principles, the last section rededicates the ELCA to

live into the challenge to change personal habits and social structures.

- It calls for commitment to personal lifestyles that help heal the environment.
- It encourages creation emphases in the church year and the development of liturgical, preaching, and education materials that celebrate God's creation.
- It calls for congregations to have an environmental audit and to incorporate principles of sufficiency and sustainability in their building, budgeting, and investment (p. 10).
- On practical questions such as nuclear and toxic waste, farming practices, or population growth, it invites the interaction of differing convictions and experiences (p. 10).
- It calls upon our church to play a role in bringing together par-

ties in the conflicts over these issues, both within the church and outside.

In public debates:

- It invites all of us to shape our advocacy with government, private entities, and international organizations (advocacy is speaking out for the earth and for others) according to the principles of participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability.
- It commits our church to dialogue with corporations on promoting justice for creation and to seek public policies that allow people to participate fully in decisions affecting their own health and livelihood.

Caring for Creation relies upon a biblical vision of wholeness for cre-

ation. It depends upon a Christian understanding of the human role to serve in creation, and a hope rooted in God's faithfulness. It leaves no question: God is at work seeking wholeness and justice for the creation, and God calls us to be hands in this work.

The statement speaks to each of us since individually and collectively we *all* can contribute to this work. Each of us was made to be a caretaker of creation.

As people of the ELCA we have answered the call to care for creation in certain respects, but we should not be surprised that this powerful statement calls the whole church to rededicate itself today as "captives of hope, and vehicles of God's promise" (p. 12). 🌿

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