

God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action

A Pastoral Letter from the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church¹

God's creation is in crisis. We, the Bishops of The United Methodist Church, cannot remain silent while God's people and God's planet suffer. This beautiful natural world is a loving gift from God, the Creator of all things seen and unseen. God has entrusted its care to all of us, but we have turned our backs on God and on our responsibilities. Our neglect, selfishness, and pride have fostered:

- pandemic poverty and disease;
- environmental degradation, and
- the proliferation of weapons and violence.ⁱ

Despite these interconnected threats to life and hope, God's creative work continues. Despite the ways we all contribute to these problems, God still invites each one of us to participate in the work of renewal. We must begin the work of renewing creation by being renewed in our own hearts and minds. *We cannot help the world until we change our way of being in it.*

We all feel saddened by the state of the world, overwhelmed by the scope of these problems, and anxious about the future, but *God calls us and equips us to respond*. No matter how bad things are, God's creative work continues. Christ's resurrection assures us that

¹The 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church called for the Council of Bishops to publish new documents and a study guide similar to the Council's landmark call in 1986, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace*. This is the Council's response to the General Conference action (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2004*: "Replace *In Defense of Creation* with new Document and Study Guide"). This Pastoral Letter was adopted November 3, 2009 at Lake Junaluska, NC, USA.

death and destruction do not have the last word. Paul taught that through Jesus Christ, God offers

redemption to all of creation and reconciles all things, “whether on earth or in heaven” (Colossians 1:20ⁱⁱ). God’s Spirit is always and everywhere at work in the world fighting poverty, restoring health, renewing creation, and reconciling peoples.

Aware of God’s vision for creation, we no longer see a list of isolated problems affecting disconnected people, plants, and animals. Rather, we see one interconnected system that is “groaning in travail” (Romans 8:22 RSV). The threats to peace, people, and planet earth are related to one another, and God’s vision encompasses complete well-being. We, your bishops, join with many global religious leaders to call for a comprehensive response to these interrelated issues. We urge all United Methodists and people of goodwill to offer themselves as instruments of God’s renewing Spirit in the world.

First, let us orient our lives toward God’s holy vision. This vision of the future calls us to hope and to action. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans you’re your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Christ’s resurrection assures us that this vision is indeed a *promise* of renewal and reconciliation. As disciples of Christ, we take God’s promise as the purpose for our lives. Let us, then, rededicate ourselves to God’s holy vision, living each day with awareness of the future that God extends to us and of the Spirit that leads us onward.

Second, let us practice social and environmental holiness. We believe personal holiness and social holiness must never be separated. John Wesley preached: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social. No holiness but social holiness.”ⁱⁱⁱ Through social holiness we make ourselves channels of God’s blessing in the world. Because God’s blessing, care, and promise of renewal extend to all of creation, we can speak today of “environmental holiness” as well. We practice social and environmental holiness by caring for God’s people and God’s planet and by

challenging those whose policies and practices neglect the poor, exploit the weak, hasten global warming, and produce more weapons.

Third, let us live and act in hope. As people in the tradition of John Wesley, we understand reconciliation and renewal to be part of the *process* of salvation that is already underway. We are not hemmed in to a fallen world. Rather we are part of a divine unfolding process to which we must contribute. As we faithfully respond to God's grace and call to action, the Holy Spirit guides us in this renewal. With a resurrection spirit, we look forward to the renewal of the whole creation and commit ourselves to that vision. We pray that God will accept and use our lives and resources that we rededicate to a ministry of peace, justice, and hope to overcome poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of weapons and violence.

With God's help and with you as our witnesses--

1. *We as your bishops pledge to answer God's call to deepen our spiritual consciousness as just stewards of creation.* We commit ourselves to faithful and effective leadership on these issues, in our denomination and in our communities and nations.
2. *We pledge to make God's vision of renewal our goal.* With every evaluation and decision, we will ask: Does this contribute to God's renewal of creation? Ever aware of the difference between what is and what must be, we pledge to practice Wesleyan "holy dissatisfaction."^{iv}
3. *We pledge to practice dialogue with those whose life experience differs dramatically from our own, and we pledge to practice prayerful self-examination.* For example, in the Council of Bishops, the fifty active bishops in the United States are committed to listening

and learning with the nineteen active bishops in Africa, Asia, and Europe. And the bishops representing the conferences in the United States will prayerfully examine the fact that their nation consumes more than its fair share of the world's resources, generates the most waste, and produces the most weapons.

4. *We pledge ourselves to make common cause with religious leaders and people of goodwill worldwide who share these concerns. We will connect and collaborate with ecumenical and interreligious partners and with community and faith organizations so that we may strengthen our common efforts.*
5. *We pledge to advocate for justice and peace in the halls of power in our respective nations and international organizations.*
6. *We pledge to measure the “carbon footprint”^N of our episcopal and denominational offices, determine how to reduce it, and implement those changes. We will urge our congregations, schools, and settings of ministry to do the same.*
7. *We pledge to provide, to the best of our ability, the resources needed by our conferences to reduce dramatically our collective exploitation of the planet, peoples, and communities, including technical assistance with buildings and programs: education and training: and young people's and online networking resources.*
8. *We pledge to practice hope as we engage and continue supporting the many transforming ministries of our denomination. Every day we will thank God for fruit produced through the work of The United Methodist Church and through each of you.*
9. *We pledge more effective use of the church and community Web pages to inspire and share what we learn.^{vi} We celebrate the communications efforts that tell the stories of struggle and transformation within our denomination.*

With these pledges, we respond to God's gracious invitation to join in the process of renewal. God is already visibly at work in people and groups around the world. We rededicate ourselves to join these movements, the movements of the Spirit. Young people are passionately raising funds to provide mosquito nets for their "siblings" thousands of miles away. Dock workers are refusing to off-load small weapons being smuggled to armed combatants in civil wars on their continents. People of faith are demanding land reform on behalf of landless farm workers. Children and young people have formed church-wide "green teams" to transform our buildings and ministries into testimonies of stewardship and sustainability. Ecumenical and interreligious partners persist in demanding the major nuclear powers to reduce their arsenals, step by verifiable step, making a way to a more secure world totally disarmed of nuclear weapons. God is already doing a new thing. With this Letter and the accompanying Foundation Document, we rededicate ourselves to participate in God's work, and we urge you all to rededicate yourselves as well.

We beseech every United Methodist, every congregation, and every public leader: *Will you participate in God's renewing work?* We are filled with hope for what God can accomplish through us, and we pray you respond: "We will, with God's help!"

May God's grace purify our reason, strengthen our will, and guide our action. May the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit be among you, everywhere and always, so that you may be a blessing to all creation and to all the children of God, making peace, nurturing and practicing hope, choosing life and coming to life eternal. Amen.

Notes

ⁱ In 2002, the Reverend Dr. William Sloane Coffin, referring to a trio of political threats, said, “A more likely and far more dangerous trio would be environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash with weapons” (*The Chautauqua Appeal*, with Joan Brown Campbell and Stephen J. Sidorak, Jr.).

ⁱⁱ Scriptural references unless otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scriptural references marked RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739, ¶ 5.

^{iv} “When . . . Christian perfection becomes the goal, a fundamental hope is aroused that the future can surpass the present. And a corresponding holy dissatisfaction is aroused with regard to any present state of affairs—a dissatisfaction that supplies the critical edge necessary to keep the process of individual transformation moving. Moreover, this holy dissatisfaction is readily transferable from the realm of the individual to that of society, where it provides a persistent motivation for reform in the light of ‘a more perfect way’ that goes beyond any status quo” (Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998], p. 168).

^v A “carbon footprint” is an estimate of how much carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas) is produced to support life activities including travel and home energy use. Carbon footprints are

also applied on a larger scale to companies, businesses, and nations.

^{vi} In support of the many persons who have followed this project of the Council, an interactive multimedia website will have resources, educational materials, downloadable studies and social networking: **www.hopeandaction.org**.