

A SOCIAL STATEMENT ON THE HUMAN CRISIS IN ECOLOGY

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Society today is confronted by a profound crisis and challenge in the world of humans and of nature. God so orders creation that everything in it is related to everything else. All physical components and all organisms, including human beings, are purposefully woven together in ecological systems¹ or ecosystems, such as forests, grasslands, the oceans, as well as the planet earth. When any part is tampered with, exploited or destroyed, the effect is felt in other parts and eventually in the whole system. The ecological crisis consists in the radical violation of the systems God creates. The challenge to human beings is the way in which they deal with this crisis; it will have profound significance for all of life in our time and for generations to come.

FACETS OF THE CRISIS

GROWTH RUNNING WILD

This is an age of rampaging growth - growth in production and consumption, sales and profits, population and power. Unchecked population increases exponentially (for example 2- 4- 8- 16- 32- 64- 128): technological and economic expansion often takes place even more rapidly. Because of increasing population, increasing consumer demands, and increasing technological achievements, the engine of the economy races on, running wild. But, with all this growth - scarcely questioned by the popular mind - come also rapidly increasing pollution, depletion of non-renewable resources, population pressures, social injustice, and deterioration in the quality of life. Since the earth is finite, with a limited supply of air, water, and places to dump refuse, there is an inevitable breaking point beyond which even the most sophisticated technology cannot rescue us.

POLLUTION

Pollution of air, water, soil, and sound is a daily experience for nearly every North American. Individuals, municipalities, industries often poison their environments with only a minimum of restraints, hardly considering the impact of their practices on human beings and the rest of the world. The serious waste problem, for example, results not only from governmental and industrial neglect but from the public's desire for the convenience of a throw-away style of life. Pollution is also a global problem. The currents of the atmosphere and the oceans carry harmful substances from contaminated areas to the most remote places of the earth. This is particularly serious with long-lived pesticides, radioactive fallout, and ecological damage caused by war.

DEPLETION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Breathable air and drinkable water, the resources most critical to life, are diminishing in quantity and quality. There is an irreplaceable reduction of minerals, open spaces and forests because of the insatiable human demand for raw materials and room for factories and housing. Technology's best efforts to develop new food sources are frustrated by the pace of population growth, the diminution of arable land, and the injury done to the productivity of soil by some chemical applications. These and other forms of resource depletion cause severe damage to plants, animals, and human beings as they push hard on the limits of the earth's ecosystems.

¹ Ecology: "The totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment." Webster's New International Dictionary

POPULATION PRESSURES

If there were no more people in the world than in the time of Christ, estimated to be about 1/4 billion, the destructive effects of population and exhaustion of resources would be minimal. Since population has grown exponentially, experts project that if this trend continues in the same manner, the earth's population, about 3.7 billion in 1971, will rise to about 7 billion by the year 2000 - a dangerously crowded planet.

Although the population growth in Canada and the United States is less than in many other lands, even in these countries the anticipated increases will cause severe problems. Most frightening, however, is the effect of North American growth upon the rest of the world. The United States alone, with only six per cent of the world's population, is responsible for a least one-third of the world's consumption of nonrenewable resources.

Population pressures enormously complicate all other facets of the ecological crisis. The stark fact is that, if the responsible decision of people does not result in population limitation, the ghastly alternatives of famine and disease, crime and violence and war will do it in their own ways.

SOCIAL INJUSTICE

The human crisis in ecology is an enormously complex and urgent problem. It is understood only when the dimension of social injustice is taken seriously. When the poisons of pollution and the explosion of population take their toll, the impact falls most heavily upon the poor, certain minority groups, and others who are already oppressed by many of the most crushing problems of today. The unequal distribution of wealth and resources both within and among nations results in injustices which cry out for redress. Too often an overemphasis on the private sector has diminished the ability of government to work effectively for justice. Too often the power of technology has been used by some nations and by some groups within nations to dominate others, thus widening the chasm between the "haves" and the "have nots." The struggle for the earth's resources and the tensions of urbanized living will become increasingly potent causes of domestic violence and international war. The issues of social injustice are profoundly involved in the ecological crisis.

A HUMAN CRISIS

THE UNDERLYING CAUSE

The underlying cause of the ecological crisis is not natural forces but human arrogance and rebellion against God, what the Christian faith calls sin. Because humans alone are responsible before God, they alone are capable of sinning. By seeking to serve themselves rather than God and their neighbors, human beings both individually and corporately forsake their humanity as responsible, relational beings. Likewise, they choose to perceive the nonhuman world not as possessing God-given integrity of its own, but as existing primarily for their use and benefit, or merely as the stage upon which they live their lives. Some of their disruptive influence, to be sure, results from their ignorance or from changing circumstances, from their inability to foresee the eventual consequences of well-intentioned actions. Nevertheless, whether through sin or ignorance, human beings violate their selves, their neighbors, and the whole of creation.

TOWARD NEW VALUES

There is little hope of arresting the mad rush toward ecological disaster unless a very large number of persons and institutions renounce certain values which have long dominated civilization. Defining "the good life" in terms of creature comforts and material "progress," many people in all strata of society cherish such assumptions as the following: that the earth's resources belong to humanity and are inexhaustible; that prosperity is a reward for diligence and character, and poverty is caused by the indolence of the poor; that maximization of profit, economic growth and technological expansion is inevitably good; that the threat of intolerable population pressures is exaggerated; and that human ingenuity, working through science, technology, and the present social structures, can resolve the ecological crisis without decisive changes in values and institutions. These old values, refection of sin and ignorance, flout ecological facts and tear the fabric of interrelatedness which is of the essence of God's creation. They must be renounced in favor of new values which give priority to quality of life rather than to quantity of things, characterized by responsibility in human community and enlightened care of the earth and its resources.

In the task of discovering new values and nurturing commitment to them, the church has a crucial role to play. Moved by faith in its Lord, love for neighbor, and concern for justice, the church joins with others in facing the stifling problems of the ecological crisis and searching for solutions which are true to these new values. It is grateful for constructive changes which have been taking place in society and in its own life, and for persons and groups whose labors have brought them about. The church sees itself called to work as an instrument of God for a maximum of justice and reconciliation in a sinful world. Recognizing the ambiguity of all decision-making, it speaks and acts trusting in God's grace.

IMPERATIVE FOR ACTION

In obedience to God and in response to the urgency of the human crisis in ecology, this church sets forth the following imperatives for action:

1) *Reaffirmation of the biblical doctrine of creation:*

Scripture portrays creation as a continuing manifestation of God's love and sovereignty. God acts to establish and preserve a just and ordered life, to enable every part of the world, in proper relation with all other parts, to perform the function for which it is made.

Human beings are part of the vast ecosystem of the planet earth. They cannot live their lives against that system; they must respect the integrity of the nonhuman world, including its inorganic components.

Only when this is remembered dare we speak of whatever uniqueness human beings may have: uniqueness in their capacity to respond to God in faith and to their neighbors in love, and in their corresponding capacity to rebel against God, alienate themselves from their neighbors, and deal selfishly with the rest of creation. God's commission to humanity to have "dominion" over the earth and "to till it and keep it," calls for responsible stewardship of the earth and all living things, to work for the fulfillment of all creation and for justice in the human community. But human beings too often have distorted this commission into a license to exploit the world and other human beings.

This means that we live ecologically among our neighbors as well as within nature. Degradation of any person degrades all persons. The individual cannot find personal integration and peace apart from struggling for the integration and peace of all humankind. For this reason, radical changes are called for in our attitudes and actions as we meet the distinctly human dimensions of the ecological crisis.

In its preaching and sacraments, worship and evangelism, education and social ministry, the church is called to teach this biblical understanding of human beings and nature as God's interrelated creation.

- 2) *Development of ecological life styles which are sensitive to the needs of human beings and the nonhuman world.*

This calls for personal, family, and societal behavior patterns which reduce pollution and the wasting of resources, for example, using recycled products when ecologically feasible, practicing selective buying, and regulating habits of consumption according to ecological criteria. It also calls for this church, in its structure, policies, and actions, to demonstrate concern for the interrelatedness of people within its own life and in the world.

- 3) *Serious questioning of the philosophy of material growth which has been virtually unchallenged in modern society.*

Some economic growth seems necessary if a more equitable distribution of wealth is to become possible. Such distribution will not be achieved automatically by economic growth; it will be accomplished only by basic economic reforms, such as changing tax structures, providing incentives, optimizing energy use, and reordering priorities, both public and private. Technology is essential to the solution of some ecological problems, but it must be controlled. The task of encouraging growth in quality of life by securing a dynamic equilibrium between consumption and available resources is complex and controversial. This church should guide its members to examine their own "growth" attitudes, and should stimulate and participate in critical interdisciplinary examination of society's dedication to material growth.

- 4) *Challenge to popular beliefs.*

Many erroneously believe that science and technology will resolve the ecological crisis without decisive changes in social structures. On the contrary, many technological advances, despite their benefits, have multiplied problems - pollution, depletion of resources, and unforeseen damage. Therefore, among other strategies, political action is needed to bring technology fully into the service of genuine quality of life. To assist existing governmental agencies, advocacy groups might be formed. Consisting of competent people from appropriate fields, such advocacy groups - independent of both industry and government - would evaluate new technological developments in terms of their direct and indirect environmental impact.

- 5) *Concern for the social costs of actions of industry and government.*

What effect, for example, do decisions regarding the disposal of industrial effluents or municipal sewage have upon lakes, rivers, and oceans - ultimately upon human beings, wildlife, and vegetation? This church supports efforts to monitor the performance of regulatory agencies at all levels of government; tax reforms which discourage polluting and encourage safe environmental practices; and legislation which requires greater accountability of private and public enterprises to their appropriate communities. Financial costs of improved ecological procedures should be allocated in such ways as not to overburden those least able to afford them.

- 6) *Earnest attention to population control.*

Population control differs from family planning in that it bases family-size decisions on the capacity of the world to support children rather than the desire of parents to have them. It is imperative that every effort be made to achieve control by voluntary incentives. If voluntary appeals prove ineffective, however, the danger from population growth is so ominous that there will be societal pressures for compulsory control. The possibility of coercion by law involves complex questions of social ethics and personal conscience which the church and society must study with great care.

7) *This church's economic policies and practices.*

This church shall witness to the affirmations of this statement in its own economic policies and practices in such areas as employment, purchasing of goods and services, investments, and responsible use of its human and financial resources. Especially in carrying out its investment policies the church should, within the criterion of fiduciary responsibility, exercise priority for considerations of ecological and social justice.

8) *Public Action.*

This church and its members should take public action which protects, restores, and enhances the natural and the specifically human environments. They should express their convictions to officials of government in behalf of constructive environmental policies and practices, and should cooperate with other churches and organizations which have similar objectives. This church and its members should pursue the same goals, in business and industry through personal contact with corporate leaders, scrutiny of investment and employment practices, participation in stockholders' meetings, selective purchasing of goods and services, and making public statements of criticism or commendation. This church should involve decision-makers in government and industry in faith-and-life dialogues to enable them to share insights into the crucial ecological issues which they face.

9) *Application of all these imperatives to the relationship among the nations of the world.*

This church should cooperate with other churches and with governmental and nongovernmental organizations in dealing with international ecological problems. New global dimensions are lifted up by the LCA Statement on World Community (1970):

It is no longer possible for one nation to consider its use, or abuse, of resources within its own borders - for instance, air and water - as its exclusive concern. The time has come for all nations to cooperate in the coordination of conservation efforts within their respective territories, as well as to establish the rule of law governing resources of oceans, polar regions, and outer space - "the international public domain." The latter task, a beginning of which has already been made, includes the establishment of agreements which protect international resources from uncontrolled private or national exploitation, the guarantee that such resources shall not be used for warlike purposes, and the development of genuinely international agencies empowered to enforce the agreements.

The issues of international social justice are an integral part of the human crisis in ecology. Fair distribution of resources and power, equitable standards of living, reduction of global pollution, just resolution of the tensions that make for war, the building of peace on earth - all the problems of world community are inescapably the problems of every nation and every citizen. Their solution, however, will require special considerations and sacrifices by the people of Canada and the United States.

A CALL

In light of the above imperatives for action the Lutheran Church in America calls upon its members and all elements of its corporate life to develop and pursue courses of action, appropriate to their respective responsibilities and capacities, which will promote environmental protection and social justice.