

Conference Message: Towards Just Peace with the Earth

Kópavogur, Iceland, 11-13 October 2017

Preamble

That the earth and all that is in it belongs to God (Psalm 24:1) is a mark of the Abrahamic religions as well as of indigenous cultures throughout the world. St Francis expresses this in his praise to the Lord through thanks to “our Sister, Mother Earth”; but now she “groans in travail” (Romans 8:22) for the violence inflicted on her, as we are reminded in Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*.

Nevertheless, as recalled in the World Council of Churches’ *Statement on the Way of Just Peace*, “we, according to His promise, look for a new heaven and a new earth in which justice dwells” (2 Peter 3:13), are assured that the Triune God will perfect and consummate all of creation at the end of time, and recognize justice and peace as both promise and present – a hope for the future and a gift here and now.

As His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I has written, the ecological crisis has spiritual roots. The exploitation and destruction of creation constitute a perversion and distortion of the Christian ethos, rather than the inevitable consequence of the biblical command to “increase and multiply” (Genesis 1:22). In defiling and destroying the environment that is held in sacred trust from one generation to the next, we sin against God and nature. There cannot be any sustainable development at the expense of spiritual values and the natural environment.

This conference - convened under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, and held in conjunction with the Arctic Circle Assembly 2017 - explored strategies on the part of faith communities to deepen commitment for and to secure a sustainable future. As Bishop Agnes M. Sigurdardottir, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Iceland, stated in her opening words to the conference, “a radical reaffirmation of the value and demands of Christian stewardship” was a guiding principle in our reflections.

As religious leaders and people of faith, we share our concerns and perspectives with the policy makers and stakeholders gathering for the Arctic Circle Assembly (13-15 October), and at the forthcoming UN Climate Change Convention meeting (COP 23) in Bonn, Germany (6-17 November), as well as with the fellowship of churches around the world, calling in Christ’s name for the necessary policies, actions and attitudinal shifts to protect and preserve the environment on this earth, God’s precious living creation, our beautiful and fragile home.

Faith Communities’ Contribution: Transformation for a Sustainable Future

Churches and faith communities have been as complicit in environmentally-harmful practices as other sectors of society. But history also demonstrates the power of religion to foster worldviews that guide people to new social, political and cultural alignments. Faith communities can be powerful sources of the social capital for positive change. The ecumenical movement and religious leaders have played a key role in advancing the concepts of sustainability and ‘climate justice’ in international and national policy forums. Now we seek to engage the transformative power of faith in promoting the social,

economic, cultural and behavioral transformations required to confront the challenge of climate change and to achieve sustainability in practice.

We encourage churches to use their own familiar and authentic biblical language and church traditions to raise awareness, to promote action, and to foster sustainability in church and society. We encourage the active engagement of churches in this mission of promoting and modeling environmentally sustainable behavior at all levels, from the national level to the local congregational level. And we welcome decisions by churches and church-related organizations to direct their investment funds away from environmentally unsustainable industries.

Given the vast national and global constituencies of people and communities represented through the churches, there is enormous potential in our networks, as well as in our relationships with interfaith partners. We should use all available means, including our communications capacities at national and international levels, to mobilize this potential.

We also need to utilize and build on the instruments and commitments negotiated through the United Nations to galvanize political will and to promote accountability to commitments made – such as Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Paris Climate Change Agreement, expressing the voice of faith and ethics in support of those processes.

Even more fundamentally, the contribution of faith must be to confront the essential immorality of lifestyles and economic systems that are based on the conquest and selfish abuse of nature and of others, and that are indifferent to injustice and ecological repercussions.

We also underline the inextricable connections between peace with the earth and peace on earth, rejecting the insanity of spiraling military expenditure and the continued reliance on nuclear weapons, and welcoming the adoption of the Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons as an important measure to protect the environment as well as human lives and communities.

The Lessons from Indigenous Spirituality

Indigenous Peoples need to be part of the entire process of consultation on climate change. Indigenous people are not the problem but part of the solution, on the front lines protecting Mother Earth and all Creation on behalf of all of us. Indigenous Peoples have experience, wisdom and narratives that can make an important contribution to addressing climate change.

We reject the passive acceptance that some lives, homes, lands, ways of living and therefore ways of being and identity-connection will be ‘lost’ while others ‘gain’ from climate change. Forced migrations and loss of identity from the Arctic and island homelands are unacceptable. Non-economic loss and damage (NELD) is a key reality and concern of Indigenous Peoples in the context of climate change. Climate policy discussions must take NELD and its impact on Indigenous Peoples into account.

We encourage the recognition of the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples who have deep and longstanding traditional knowledge of the environments that are their ancestral homelands. Such spirituality and wisdom is for the well being of all created life and the earth and cosmos intended for the generations to come.

With other stakeholders, we seek to advance the recognition, respect and implementation of treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements that are a concrete commitment to women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and all peoples for the right to a future. An essential framework and guide for action on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons and the 2015 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples Outcome Document.

There is need for concrete collaborative action plans. We pledge our resources which include visions, dreams, hopes, love, faith, and narratives of meaning to the cause. The grief we feel is a resource, but not our only contribution in this precarious moment.

Responses to the Threat from Global Warming to Island Populations in the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean

Island populations – whether in the Arctic region, the Pacific or as seen recently and tragically in the Caribbean – suffer disproportionately from the already evident impacts of climate change and are among the most vulnerable to further climate change. The projected temperature increases in the Arctic region are twice those of the global averages. And the melting ice of the Arctic has a direct consequence for small low-lying island states such as Kiribati in the Pacific whose future existence are already threatened by rising seas levels. Relocation of people, loss of shorelines and the degradation of land and water resources are already a reality and an emergent threat.

We call for urgent global action in response to the dangers posed to small island states in these regions by rising sea levels. We encourage threatened island nations to join hands to support each other morally, culturally, financially and through the exchange of experience in confronting a perilous future.

We urge global organizations and other governments to share all available information and technical expertise with threatened island states, to help their peoples cope with climate change, to mitigate the present risks, and to adapt to the already dangerous conditions – including through public educational and capacity-building initiatives.

We further encourage churches to use their own language and rituals in the blessing of the waters – rivers, lakes and seas – as a spiritual sign of the urgency of protecting the natural environment and the lives that depend on it.

Appeal

In concluding our discussions and deliberations, our reflections and our praying together, and in anticipation of the forthcoming gatherings of policy-makers and stakeholders at the Arctic Circle Assembly 2017, the COP 23 UN Climate Change Conference and elsewhere,

We appeal:

- For urgent concerted and accelerated action by governments, private sector entities, communities and individuals to mitigate climate change, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to meet targets in the Paris Agreement, recognizing the brief and rapidly diminishing window of opportunity for ensuring global temperature increase does not exceed 2°.

- For recognition by all individuals and communities of their responsibility and agency – as the UN and governments – in responding to the challenge of climate change.
- For the global, national and local engagement of faith communities and religious leaders in this task, as key influencers and sources of social capital for conversion from unsustainable attitudes and behaviors to a holistic approach to a sustainable future.
- Indigenous Peoples need to be part of the entire process of consultation on climate change in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the 2015 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples Outcome Document.

The Revelation of St John lifts up a vision of human flourishing (22:2) to which this conference adheres: “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.”

Let us renew and sanctify our connectedness to nature, for the healing of the nations and of the world.
