

**AMERICAN BAPTIST
POLICY STATEMENT ON ECOLOGY:
AN ECOLOGICAL SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS**

From earliest times human beings have sought to understand their relationship to the environment, as the Greek meaning of the word ecology indicates: eco (house or home) and logia (the science, or study of). Modern humanity has a critical task before it. Our impact on the environment is disrupting nearly every ecosystem on the planet at a rapidly accelerating rate. Glaciers brought major reshaping and change. Our activities caused even more drastic changes in a fraction of the time.

The thinning of the ozone layer will allow more of the sun's ultraviolet radiation to reach the earth, causing more skin cancers, impairing human immune systems and retarding crop growth. Gases already present in the atmosphere will cause continuing deterioration of the ozone layer for years to come.

The "greenhouse effect" is causing a warming of the global environment. It is produced by rising levels of CO₂ (carbon dioxide) and other gases caused primarily by the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation. Evidence that the warming is already underway was reported in 1988 by a U. S. Geological Survey Team, which reported that the frozen earth beneath the Arctic tundra in Alaska had warmed 4 to 7 degrees Fahrenheit over the last century.

One of the most feared consequences of global warming is the rise in sea level of several feet that will result from thermal expansion of the oceans and the melting of glaciers and polar ice caps.¹ Ice sheet melt is leading to coastal erosion in places like Alaska. Many major cities are located in coastal areas such as Shanghai, London and New York. Low lying densely populated areas of Asia, including parts of Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the deltas of the Indus, Mekong and Chang Jiang (Yangtze) Rivers would be especially vulnerable to flooding. The costs of protecting the rice growing plains and deltas of Asia and the densely populated coastal regions of the world are incalculable.

According to a national forum convened in October, 1986, (by the U. S. National Academy of Science and the Smithsonian Institute) nearly 100 prominent biologists sounded a note of warning about the multiplying threats to species survival. Participants warned of a potential wave of extinction which would approach the magnitude of the natural cataclysm which wiped out the dinosaurs and half of all extinct species millions of years ago. By contrast, human activities drive the disaster now unfolding.

Deforestation is increasing rapidly in many Third World nations as a result of land clearing, firewood gathering, logging and highway building. In central Europe and the United States major losses are due to air pollution and acid rain. Half of the world's rain forests, the lungs of the earth, have disappeared in the last 40 years. In addition to direct economic losses to forest industries, serious environmental consequences occur including species depletion, increased run-off of rainfall with accompanying flooding and soil erosion, and diminished water quality. Time alone will reveal the full story of ecological loss.

Burgeoning human populations are integrally related to other ecological problems. During mid-1986 the world population reached five billion indicating mounting pressures on the earth's natural resources and ecological

¹ A 1.8 degree Fahrenheit increase in ocean temperature would raise the sea level an estimated 60 centimeters, or roughly two feet. Scientists agree that global warming would have the greatest effect at the poles. If the earth as a whole warms by 3.6 or 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit, as it is predicted with a doubling of preindustrial CO₂ levels, polar temperatures are likely to rise 10.8 to 14.4 degrees Fahrenheit with a corresponding rise in ocean levels of one meter.

systems. Experts project the doubling of world population to 10 billion in the early 21st century. The earth's biological systems are becoming less able to adequately support the population expansion. Stanford University biologist, Peter M. Vitousek, and his colleagues estimate that nearly 40% of the net primary productivity on earth is now used directly or indirectly by humans--mostly for food production but also for fiber, lumber and fuel--or it is lost as a result of our activities. The amount remaining to sustain all other species and to maintain the integrity of natural systems gets smaller and smaller as the size and demands of the human population increase. This denial of needed energy to natural support systems could cause their deterioration on a massive scale.

Other serious environmental problems threaten our survival, including acid rain, toxic and hazardous wastes, soil erosion, pesticide contamination and groundwater pollution. A sustainable society fulfills its needs without diminishing the prospects of generations to come. Contemporary society fails to meet this criterion. Efforts to improve living standards are themselves beginning to threaten the health of the global economy. On every continent issues of ecological sustainability demand attention. The impact of human interaction with the environment now threatens the habitability of the earth itself.

THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...Then God commanded, "Let the earth produce all kinds of plants, those that yield grain and those that yield fruit," and it was done. So the earth produced all kinds of plants, and God was pleased.

- Genesis 1:1, 11-12 (paraphrase)

The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed the laws,
violated the statutes
broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore, a curse devours the earth
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore, the inhabitants of the earth
are scorched,
and few are left.

- Isaiah 24:5-6 (R.S.V.)

These two passages of scripture present a stark contrast. We have poisoned the earth which God has given us. It is no longer the beautiful garden that Genesis portrays as the home of Adam and Eve. Instead, it is one of streams polluted by nearby landfills, of air filled with chlorofluoro-carbons destroying the ozone layer, and of forests dying from acid rain. The images of the prophet are visible in many places around the world today. Our irresponsibility as creatures is destroying the creation.

Creation and the Covenant of Caring

Christians believe that the whole creation is God's handiwork and belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). The creation has value in itself because God created and values it (Proverbs 8:29-31). God delights in the creation and desires its wholeness and well-being.

God created the earth, affirmed that it was good, and established an everlasting covenant with humanity to take responsibility for the whole of creation. God declares all of creation good. Our proper perspective on all activity on the earth flows directly from our affirmation of God as Creator.

The earth belongs to God, as affirmed in Psalm 24:1. We are caretakers or stewards. Thus we are each related to God as one appointed to take care of someone else's possessions entrusted to us -- our life, our home, the earth.

The vast resources of the earth can provide for all its inhabitants, or they can be greedily swallowed up or poisoned by a few without regard for the impact of their actions.

The best understanding of the Biblical attitude of humanity's relationship with the Creation can be gained by a study of the Greek words which are the foundation of the New Testament. The word "stewardship" comes from the Greek words for house and management. The Greek word which is commonly translated "stewardship" is the root word for economics and ecology. The literal translation of steward is manager of the household. As such, we are all called to be managers of God's household, the earth and all that is in it.

Our responsibility as stewards is one of the most basic relationships we have with God. It implies a great degree of caring for God's creation and all God's creatures. The right relationship embodied in the everlasting covenant to which Isaiah refers. There can be no justice without right relationships of creatures with one another and with all of creation. Eco-justice is the vision of the garden in Genesis -- the realm and the reality of right relationship.

God has given humans tremendously creative capacities. The development of science has enabled us to understand the inherent capabilities of the resources God gave. Modern scientific technology has provided thousands of ways of applying scientific knowledge to improve our lives. It is a powerful tool, and one of the gifts God has given us.

Technology holds the possibility of both good and evil, life and death. We are given the responsibility to choose: "I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then so that you and your descendants may live..."(Deuteronomy 30:19). It is our responsibility as stewards to require that technology be used for the good and that the harmful effects of its use (or misuse) be mitigated or prevented.

Responsibility -- Individual and Corporate

The image of God within us makes it possible for people to be aware and responsive to God's self-revelation in the creation. We have the gift of God which enables us to perceive and reflect upon the life within us and around us. The distinctive human vocation is to bring creation's beauty and order to consciousness and to express God's image within us by caring for the creation.

In the ability God has given us to make choices also lies inherent danger. We can choose to disobey, to be irresponsible, to disrupt and disturb the peaceable relationship of creature and creation. We can choose to use

nature's resources only for what we perceive is our own immediate interest. Such action is sin. It is a violation of the basic covenant wherein we are called to stewardship. It is an unfaithful refusal of the responsibility entrusted to us. Often we tend to think of sin in terms of individual actions. Yet decisions and actions which we make as groups, communities and societies constitute corporate sin. These corporate decisions and actions reflect values and interests which conflict with the vision of shalom and eco-justice consistent with created order. Our task is to discern the conflict and to choose ways of living which build an eco-just community and world.

Jesus -- A Model for Taking Side

Jesus' ministry provides a model for choosing sides. He is clear about where his loyalty lies. In his earliest reported reading of scripture in public, he chooses, Luke tells us, to read from the prophet Isaiah. He proclaims that his mission is to serve the poor, the captives and the downtrodden -- the victims of social injury. He further states that he will "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." This is the Jubilee Year of Leviticus 25, a year of land reform. It is a recognition that all land basically and ultimately belongs to God, and that no person or group has the right to destroy it or to use it unendingly for unjust personal or institutional gain.

AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT ON ECOLOGY

The study of ecology has become a religious, social and political concern because every area of life is affected by careless use of our environment. The creation is in crisis. We believe that ecology and justice, stewardship of creation and redemption are interdependent. Our task is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ until the coming of the Kingdom on Earth. All God's people must be guided by the balance of reverence, the acknowledgement of our interdependence, the integrity of divine wholeness and the need for empowerment by the Holy Spirit to image God by our dominion over creation (Mark 10:43-45). If we image God we will reflect in our dominion the love and the care that God has for the whole creation, "for God so loved the world..." (John 3:16, Romans 8:21-22, Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus told us to let your light so shine that others may see the good things you do and praise God (Matthew 5:16).

The Bible affirms, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1). As Christians we believe that the whole universe reveals God's manifold works. God continues to create as well as to redeem. God asks us not only to call persons to redemption but also to teach them to be wise stewards, tenderly caring for God's creation.

Today the human race faces an unprecedented challenge to rediscover the role of steward in a time of extraordinary peril and promise. Global warming, the growth of population, the depletion of nonrenewable resources, tropical deforestation, the pollution of air, land, and water, waste of precious materials and the general assault of God's creation, springing from greed, arrogance and ignorance, present the possibility of irreversible damage to the intricate, natural systems upon which life depends. At the same time nuclear weapons threaten the planet. They have the capability not only of destroying human life on a massive scale but also of poisoning and altering the environment in ways that would render much of the planet incapable of sustaining life. The danger is real and great. Churches and individual Christians must take responsibility to God and neighbor seriously and respond (Eph. 2:10).

Ironically, science and technology have multiplied many times the ecological threat. The very instruments that brought great blessing--and still hold much

promise--now threaten to bring disaster unless they are used in concert rather than in conflict with the created order.

God made a world that is good in reality and potential, but our enslavement to modern industrial images of civilization hinders our ability to envision God's created order. According to our Native-American Christian sisters and brothers, we are causing the earth to self-destruct, and then we are dying of loneliness for our ruined lands. This loneliness is best understood as an alienation from Creator and creation (Job 41:1-11, 42:5-6). We are dealing with the classic theological issues of a good Creator and creation, human sin and the fall into evil which requires radical repentance in response to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation cannot come to creation unless we repent and turn away from former lifestyles (Romans 8:12-14, 18-23).

The Creator-Redeemer seeks the renewal of the creation and calls the people of God to participate in saving acts of renewal. We are called to cooperate with God in the transformation of a fallen world that has not fulfilled its divinely given potential for beauty, peace, health, harmony, justice and joy (Isa. 11:6-9, Micah 4:3-4, Eph. 2:10, Rev. 21:1-5). Our task is nothing less than to join God in preserving, renewing and fulfilling the creation. It is to relate to nature in ways that sustain life on the planet, provide for the essential material and physical needs of all humankind, and increase justice and well-being for all life in a peaceful world.

A wise and responsible people will recognize the increasing interdependence of all humankind in an emerging planetary society. In our time we must provide opportunities for all to grow and thrive. The fortunate who tolerate misery, strife and terrorism elsewhere, can stay safe themselves no longer. In a quest for survival, justice, and peace, we are "members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). The neighbor whom we are commanded to love is everyone (Luke 10:27), including those yet to be born who depend on us to leave them a habitable earth. Because God is our delivered, we must recognize sin and refuse to participate in it.

Ecology and justice are inseparable. The threat to the global environment presents American Baptists with a call for prompt and vigorous response. As Christians and faithful stewards, we bear the responsibility to affirm and support programs, legislation, research and organizations that protect and restore the vulnerable and the oppressed, the earth as well as the poor. This responsibility for a habitable environment is not just for human life, but for all life. A stewardship that will fulfill this responsibility will be guided by the norms of solidarity, as we stand with the vulnerable creation and work with its defenders; sustainability, as we devise social systems that maintain the balance of nature, and sufficiency, as we give priority to basic sustenance for all life.

Therefore, we call on all of the members of the American Baptist Churches of the USA to:

1. Affirm the goodness and beauty of God's creations.
2. Acknowledge our responsibility for stewardship of the Creator's good earth.
3. Learn of the environmental dangers facing the planet.
4. Recognize that our practices and styles of life have had an effect on the environment.

5. Pursue a lifestyle that is wise and responsible in light of our understanding of the problems.
6. Exert our influence in shaping public policy and insisting that industries, businesses, farmers and consumers relate to the environment in ways that are sensible, healthy and protective of its integrity.
7. Demonstrate concern with "the hope that is within us," as despair and apathy surround us in the world (Rom. 12:21).
8. Become involved in organizations and actions to protect and restore the environment and the people in our communities.

We call upon the National Boards, Regions and institutions of our denomination to:

9. Promote an attitude affirming that all nature has intrinsic value and that all life is to be honored and revered.
10. Seek ways and means to alert the churches to present and impending environmental threats.

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