

Reconciled in Christ with Creator and Creation: The Worshipful Work of Caring for the Earth and People

Wisconsin Council of Churches Policy
Statement, Adopted December 12, 2006.

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A note about this statement: Policy statements of the Wisconsin Council of Churches express the biblical, theological, and ethical grounds for the Council's work and witness regarding matters of concern to God's people in the world. They are not binding on member churches, but provide direction and guidance for the Council's education, and worship, advocacy and programming. We hope that they may also be helpful and inspiring to anyone who seeks to think and live as a Christian disciple in the public realm.

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As members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches "We pray and work together for . . . the healing and reconciliation of the world." "The world" includes the natural environment, and our care for creation is a matter of praying as well as working – it is "worshipful work." Thus, this statement reflects a pattern familiar in our traditions of worship: Invocation, Confession and Repentance, Proclamation, Response, and Sending Forth.

I. God, Humanity, Nature

From Genesis through Revelation, scripture repeatedly affirms that the whole earth is God's good creation, filled with the divine glory and mirroring God's wisdom, mystery, and majesty (Is. 6:3; Rom 1:20).¹ All creation is a gift. By God's grace this planet is a life-sustaining home for us and for all earth's creatures (Gen 1, Ps 104). The whole creation depends on God, to whom all things belong (Ps. 24:1). God loves the world, the *kosmos*, (John 3:16-17) and we cannot love God without loving what God loves.

Daily we receive God's gifts through the complex, interdependent ecological web into which our lives are woven: gifts of physical and mental health, beauty, material resources, the shared basis for community, and a diverse environment. Study of the natural world gives us knowledge that is useful and that deepens our awe and appreciation for the Creator and the creation.

We are human creatures, dependent on the rest of creation. While we have great abilities to transform matter and energy, we can create neither. We are

fellow creatures with all that God has made, sharing with them a common origin and destiny (Gen 1, Rom 8, Rev. 22). As divine images reflecting God's gracious love and care, we have been given the special vocation of caring for creation, and special gifts for appreciating, understanding, cultivating, and protecting it (Gen 1:28, 2:15).

II. A Threatened Creation

Arrogance, greed, and ignorance, however, have distorted this calling into a domination that exploits and degrades both human beings and the natural world. Social injustice and ecological destruction are manifestations of sin (Isa.5:8-10, 24:4-7).

The consequences of this distortion of our calling are many: global climate change; biodiversity loss; air and water pollution; environmental health hazards; urban sprawl; loss of forests, rivers and farmland; the loss of natural beauty; loss of contact with the natural world, and much more.

Locked in a vicious cycle with these environmental problems are hunger, war and preparations for war, poverty, and injustice. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."² The poor and vulnerable suffer the most from environmental degradation. Poverty and insecurity, in turn, lead people to over-exploit their local environments, which contributes to political and armed conflicts that cause further destruction and displace people from their land. The more affluent among us consume more than a fair share of the earth's resources, often in ways that undermine creation's integrity and harm our human neighbors. But benefiting economically from the abuse of earth and people diminishes us morally and spiritually.

Our political and economic policies take too little account of the consequences of our actions. Industrial civilization is on a collision course with environmental limits – if we have not already exceeded them. Future generations will reap a bitter harvest from the seeds we sow (Hos. 8:7).

We must change our ways. Our means of producing energy, food and other necessities must become more just and sustainable. Responsible economic development can meet human needs over the long term while maintaining ecological integrity.

III. Repentance and Commitment

As citizens of Wisconsin, we have enjoyed the beauty and the bounty of our state and wish to preserve it for all who live here and for those who come after us.

Past and present generations have not always treated the land, the waters, their inhabitants, and our neighbors with care or respect. Yet we are grateful for the legacies of the native peoples of Wisconsin, and for Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Sigurd Olson, Gaylord Nelson, Philip Lewis, and many others who have sought to show a better way to inhabit the earth.³ We know that change is urgently needed if we and our descendants are to continue to enjoy the blessings of this gifted land.

Because of the extended reach of technology, trade and communications, our actions have global consequences, and events far away affect our own communities. Our responsibilities are national and global as well as local.

As members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, we call ourselves and our fellow citizens to repentance and to a renewed commitment to responsible living in our part of Creation. As Christian communities, we have a responsibility to lift up the ethical and spiritual values that must guide our behavior as members of earth's household.⁴

IV. Having The Mind of Christ

As Christians, our pursuit of a just, sustainable, and life-sustaining world is energized and guided by our faith in Jesus Christ. We see Christ's face in all people, especially the "least" among us (Mt. 25:31-46). We desire to have the mind of Christ, who in the Incarnation took the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5-8), and who in his life and ministry challenged the structures of imperial and religious domination of his day (Mt.20:25-28). Today, the voiceless and vulnerable victims of domination we are called to serve and defend include future generations and the natural world as well as the poor.

V. Principles for Witness and Discipleship in Public Life

Christian witness and discipleship is lived out in public as well as personal life. The Wisconsin Council of Churches is committed to the following principles in our advocacy for environmentally re-

sponsible policies in national and state government, businesses, churches, and other organizations:

Respect for the whole earth community. As we provide for ourselves and our human neighbors, we must also provide for the survival and well-being of our fellow creatures in their habitats. Following the principle of the Sabbath, we must recognize creation's limits and its need for rhythms of rest and recuperation: we cannot press creatures to produce for us in ways that violate their integrity (Ex. 23:10-12). Remembering the story of Noah we realize that all creatures – "clean and unclean" – are valued by God regardless of their usefulness for human beings.

A comprehensive view of the common good. Peace, justice, and sustainability are interdependent. Each is essential to the common good of life in all its forms. Environmentally unsustainable practices undercut our efforts to achieve justice and peace for all persons; violence and injustice undermine sustainability. Nor is a violent, unjust, and ecologically impoverished society the sort of society we wish to sustain.

Sustainable sufficiency for all. Over-consumption of natural resources by a relative few is a major cause of environmental degradation. At the same time, many have barely enough to survive. A more equitable and sustainable sharing of the earth's bounty will require more efficient technologies for meeting human needs, as well as a reduced consumption and increased conservation ethic by those who already have more than enough.

Environmental rights for all persons. All human beings have the right to a safe and healthy environment as well as access to essential natural resources such as food, water, and energy. They also have the right to the material and social conditions for contented and dignified lives; and for rich and rewarding relationships with one another and with the natural world. The needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized people must be given special attention.

Responsibility for the future. The beauty, integrity, and diversity of the earth, as well as its material resources, are an inheritance from the past that we hold in trust for future generations. The decisions we make now will affect their well-being. We must not foreclose their opportunities by exhausting non-renewable resources, causing major long-term or irreversible global environmental changes, or dimin-

ishing the continued fruitfulness of the earth by overexploiting renewable resources.

Democratic participation. Effective environmental policymaking requires well-informed participation by members of the community in the decisions that affect them. Democracy must serve the good of all, rather than the desires of a powerful few who stand to benefit in material terms from the destructive exploitation of people and the earth. As we are all sustained by the resources and life-support systems of this planet, so we also share a common responsibility for conserving, protecting, and restoring them.

Prudence. There are limits to our ability to predict, control, or defend ourselves against the consequences of our actions. We do not have the luxury of certainty, but when the best available evidence and interpretation indicate that a particular course of action – or inaction – could jeopardize future well-being, prudence requires us to respond appropriately, even if that means making challenging and far-reaching changes in our way of life.

Support for stewards of the land. As fewer of us are directly engaged in making our living from the land, we depend on farmers, farm workers, and others who help us to meet our needs from creation's bounty. We must seek justice for them while encouraging environmentally healthy and sustainable forms of agriculture, forestry, and fishing. We especially owe smaller family farmers a just livelihood so they can support themselves, their families, and their communities while acting on our behalf as good stewards of the land.

VI. The Charge to the Church

The Holy Spirit calls the church, as Christ's body in the world, to reflect in word and action God's intention to reconcile the whole creation (Col. 1). This calling is not an optional activity to be relegated to a congregation's social ministry committee, but belongs to the whole worshipful work of every congregation. Therefore, the Wisconsin Council of Churches is committed to the care of creation as integral to its mission:

- ⊕ In doxology – Offering praise, honor, and gratitude to the Creator by celebrating and appreciating the Creation;
- ⊕ In confession – Facing the truth of our situation without complacency or despair, and accepting our own complicity in Earth's distress;

- ⊕ In teaching – Forming disciples who accept their responsibility to care for creation in their community and the world;
- ⊕ In service – Protecting and restoring creation and helping others to have livelihoods of sustainable sufficiency;
- ⊕ In advocacy – Reminding the government, private enterprise, and the public of their responsibility for the common good, and speaking out on behalf of the voiceless;
- ⊕ In daily life – Actively redefining the “good life” in contrast to the culture of materialistic consumerism, and as based on abundant life in Christ Jesus, who offers to all the inexhaustible and infinitely renewable gifts of love, grace, justice, and peace.

¹ See www.nrpe.org and www.creationcare.org for collections of biblical references on creation and creation care. See www.nccecojustice.org and www.nrpe.org for collections and excerpts of related denominational statements.

² Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

³ **Aldo Leopold** (1887-1948) was Professor of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of *A Sand County Almanac*. He wrote that our ethics must include concern for the health of the land as an interdependent community of living things, to which human beings belong. (www.aldoleopold.org)

John Muir (1838-1914) emigrated to Wisconsin from Scotland as a child. A naturalist, writer, and pioneering conservationist with a deep and ecstatic love for creation, he campaigned vigorously for wilderness preservation and founded the Sierra Club.

(http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/)

Gaylord Nelson (1916-2005) served Wisconsin as Governor and Senator. A champion of landmark environmental legislation including the Wilderness Act and the National Environmental Education Act, he is best known as the founder of Earth Day. The Nelson Institute of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison is named for him. (<http://www.ies.wisc.edu/>)

Sigurd Olson (1899-1982) writer and conservationist, grew up in northern Wisconsin. He was instrumental in establishing the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Olson and Nelson were keynote speakers at a 1971 conference at Northland College, Ashland, WI, which led to the founding of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute. (<http://www.northland.edu/soei/>)

Philip H. Lewis, Jr., landscape architect, inventoried Wisconsin's natural areas and promoted their protection. He described his approach to environmentally sensitive land use in *Tomorrow by Design: A Regional Design Process for Sustainability* and continues his research and practice at the Marshall Erdman Academy of Sustainable Design in Madison, WI.

⁴ *Oikos*, the Greek word for “household,” is the common root of “ecology,” “economy,” and “ecumenism.”