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A Social Statement on: Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



A Social Statement on:

Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice

Adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote as a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by the third Churchwide Assembly on August 28, 1993, at Kansas City, Missouri.

PROLOGUE

Christian concern for the environment is shaped by the Word of God spoken in creation, the Love of God hanging on a cross, the Breath of God daily renewing the face of the earth.

We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are deeply concerned about the environment, locally and globally, as members of this church and as members of society. Even as we join the political, economic, and scientific discussion, we know care for the earth to be a profoundly spiritual matter.

As Lutheran Christians, we confess that both our witness to God's goodness in creation and our acceptance of caregiving responsibility have often been weak and uncertain. This statement:

- ♦ offers a vision of God's intention for creation and for humanity as creation's caregivers;
- ♦ acknowledges humanity's separation from God and from the rest of creation as the central cause of the environmental crisis;
- ♦ recognizes the severity of the crisis; and
- ♦ expresses hope and heeds the call to justice and commitment.

This statement summons us, in particular, to a faithful return to the biblical vision.

I. THE CHURCH'S VISION OF CREATION

A. God, Earth, and All Creatures

We see the despoiling of the environment as nothing less than the degradation of God's gracious gift of creation.

Scripture witnesses to God as creator of the earth and all that dwells therein (Psalm 24:1). The creeds, which guide our reading of Scripture, proclaim God the Father of Jesus Christ as "maker of heaven and earth," Jesus Christ as the one "through [whom] all things were made," and the Holy Spirit as "the Lord, the giver of life" (Nicene Creed).

God blesses the world and sees it as "good," even before humankind comes on the scene. All creation, not just humankind, is viewed as "very good" in God's eyes (Genesis 1:31). God continues to bless the world: "When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (Psalm 104:30). By faith we understand God to be deeply, mysteriously, and unceasingly involved in what happens in all creation. God showers care upon sparrows and lilies (Matthew 6:26-30), and brings "rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life" (Job 38:26).

Central to our vision of God's profound involvement with the world is the Incarnation. In Christ, the Word is made flesh, with saving significance for an entire creation that longs for fulfillment (Romans 8:18-25). The Word still comes to us in the waters of baptism, and in, with, and under the bread and wine, fruits of the earth and the work of human hands. God consistently meets us where we live, through earthy matter.

B. Our Place in Creation

Humanity is intimately related to the rest of creation. We, like other creatures, are formed from the earth (Genesis 2:7, 9, 19). Scripture speaks of humanity's kinship with other creatures (Psalm 104, Job 38-39). God cares faithfully for us, and together we join in singing the "hymn of all creation" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 61; Psalm 148). We look forward to a redemption that includes all creation (Ephesians 1:10).

Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God's command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8), a special

responsibility, should reflect God's way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns.

According to Genesis 2:15, our role within creation is to serve and to keep God's garden, the earth. "To serve," often translated "to till," invites us again to envision ourselves as servants, while "to keep" invites us to take care of the earth as God keeps and cares for us (Numbers 6:24-26).

We are called to name the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). As God names Israel and all creation (Isaiah 40:26; 43:1; Psalm 147:4) and as the shepherd calls by name each sheep (John 10:3), naming unites us in a caring relationship. Further, we are to live within the covenant God makes with every living thing (Genesis 9:12-17; Hosea 2:18), and even with the day and night (Jeremiah 33:20). We are to love the earth as God loves us.

We are called to live according to God's wisdom in creation (Proverbs 8), which brings together God's truth and goodness. Wisdom, God's way of governing creation, is discerned in every culture and era in various ways. In our time, science and technology can help us to discover how to live according to God's creative wisdom.

Such caring, serving, keeping, loving, and living by wisdom sum up what is meant by acting as God's stewards of the earth. God's gift of responsibility for the earth dignifies humanity without debasing the rest of creation. We depend upon God, who places us in a web of life with one another and with all creation.

II. THE URGENCY

A. Sin and Captivity

Not content to be made in the image of God (Genesis 3:5; Ezekiel 28:1-10), we have rebelled and disrupted creation. As did the people of ancient Israel, we experience nature as an instrument of God's judgment (cf., Deuteronomy 11:13-17; Jeremiah 4:23-28). A disrupted nature is a judgment on our unfaithfulness as stewards.

Alienated from God and from creation, and driven to make a name for ourselves (Genesis 11:4), we become captives to demonic powers and unjust institutions (Galatians 4:9; Ephesians 6:12; Revelation 13:1-4). In our captivity, we treat the earth as a boundless warehouse and allow the powerful to exploit its bounties to their own ends (Amos 5:6-15). Our sin and captivity lie at the roots of the current crisis.

B. The Current Crisis

The earth is a planet of beauty and abundance; the earth system is wonderfully intricate and incredibly complex. But today living creatures, and the air, soil, and water that support them, face unprecedented threats. Many threats are global; most stem directly from human activity. Our current practices may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner we know.

Twin problems—excessive consumption by industrialized nations, and relentless growth of human population worldwide—jeopardize efforts to achieve a sustainable future. These problems spring from and intensify social injustices. Global population growth, for example, relates to the lack of access by women to family planning and health care, quality education, fulfilling employment, and equal rights.

Processes of environmental degradation feed on one another. Decisions affecting an immediate locale often affect the entire planet. The resulting damages to environmental systems are frightening:

- ♦ depletion of non-renewable resources, especially oil;
- ♦ loss of the variety of life through rapid destruction of habitats;
- ♦ erosion of topsoil through unsustainable agriculture and forestry practices;
- ♦ pollution of air by toxic emissions from industries and vehicles, and pollution of water by wastes;
- ♦ increasing volumes of wastes; and
- ♦ prevalence of acid rain, which damages forests, lakes, and streams.

Even more widespread and serious, according to the preponderance of evidence from scientists worldwide, are:

- ♦ the depletion of the protective ozone layer, resulting from the use of volatile compounds containing chlorine and bromine; and
- ♦ dangerous global warming, caused by the buildup of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide.

The idea of the earth as a boundless warehouse has proven both false and dangerous. Damage to the environment eventually will affect most people through increased conflict over scarce resources, decline in food security, and greater vulnerability to disease.

Indeed, our church already ministers with and to people:

- ♦ who know firsthand the effects of environmental deterioration because they work for polluting industries or live near incinerators or waste dumps;

- ♦ who make choices between preserving the environment and damaging it further in order to live wastefully or merely to survive; and
- ♦ who can no longer make their living from forests, seas, or soils that are either depleted or protected by law.

In our ministry, we learn about the extent of the environmental crisis, its complexities, and the suffering it entails. Meeting the needs of today's generations for food, clothing, and shelter requires a sound environment. Action to counter degradation, especially within this decade, is essential to the future of our children and our children's children. Time is very short.

III. THE HOPE

A. The Gift of Hope

Sin and captivity, manifest in threats to the environment, are not the last word. God addresses our predicament with gifts of "forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation" (Luther, *Small Catechism*). By the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God frees us from our sin and captivity, and empowers us to be loving servants to creation.

Although we remain sinners, we are freed from our old captivity to sin. We are now driven to God's promise of blessings yet to come. Only by God's promise are we no longer captives of demonic powers or unjust institutions. We are captives of hope (Zechariah 9:11-12). Captured by hope, we proclaim that God has made peace with all things through the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:15-20), and that the Spirit of God, "the giver of life," renews the face of the earth.

Captured by hope, we dream dreams and look forward to a new creation. God does not just heal this creation wounded by human sin. God will one day consummate all things in "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:13). Creation—now in captivity to disruption and death—will know the freedom it awaits.

B. Hope in Action

We testify to the hope that inspires and encourages us. We announce this hope to every people, and witness to the renewing work of the Spirit of God. We are to be a herald here and now to the new creation yet to come, a living model.

Our tradition offers many glimpses of hope triumphant over despair. In ancient Israel, as Jerusalem was under siege and people were on the verge of exile, Jeremiah purchased a plot of land (Jeremiah 32). When Martin Luther was asked what he

would do if the world were to end tomorrow, he reportedly answered, “I would plant an apple tree today.” When *we* face today’s crisis, we do not despair. We act.

IV. THE CALL TO JUSTICE

Caring, serving, keeping, loving, and living by wisdom—these translate into justice in political, economic, social, and environmental relationships. Justice in these relationships means honoring the integrity of creation, and striving for fairness within the human family.

It is in hope of God’s promised fulfillment that we hear the call to justice; it is in hope that we take action. When we act interdependently and in solidarity with creation, we *do* justice. We serve and keep the earth, trusting its bounty can be sufficient for all, and sustainable.

A. Justice through Participation

We live within the covenant God makes with all living things, and are in relationship with them. *The principle of participation means they are entitled to be heard and to have their interests considered when decisions are made.*

Creation must be given voice, present generations and those to come. We must listen to the people who fish the sea, harvest the forest, till the soil, and mine the earth, as well as to those who advance the conservation, protection, and preservation of the environment.

We recognize numerous obstacles to participation. People often lack the political or economic power to participate fully. They are bombarded with manipulated information, and are prey to the pressures of special interests. The interests of the rest of creation are inadequately represented in human decisions.

We pray, therefore, that our church may be a place where differing groups can be brought together, tough issues considered, and a common good pursued.

B. Justice through Solidarity

Creation depends on the Creator, and is interdependent within itself. *The principle of solidarity means that we stand together as God’s creation.*

We are called to acknowledge this interdependence with other creatures and to act locally and globally on behalf of all creation. Furthermore, solidarity also asks us to stand with the victims of fire, floods, earthquakes, storms, and other natural disasters.

We recognize, however, the many ways we have broken ranks with creation. The land and its inhabitants are often disenfranchised by the rich and powerful. The degradation of the environment occurs where people have little or no voice in decisions — because of racial, gender, or economic discrimination. This degradation aggravates their situation and swells the numbers of those trapped in urban or rural poverty.

We pray, therefore, for the humility and wisdom to stand with and for creation, and the fortitude to support advocates whose efforts are made at personal risk.

C. Justice through Sufficiency

The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord. No person or group has absolute claim to the earth or its products. *The principle of sufficiency means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all creation.*

In a world of finite resources, for all to have enough means that those with more than enough will have to change their patterns of acquisition and consumption. Sufficiency charges us to work with each other and the environment to meet needs without causing undue burdens elsewhere.

Sufficiency also urges us to care for arable land so that sufficient food and fiber continue to be available to meet human needs. We affirm, therefore, the many stewards of the land who have been and are conserving the good earth that the Lord has given us.

We recognize many forces that run counter to sufficiency. We often seek personal fulfillment in acquisition. We anchor our political and economic structures in greed and unequal distribution of goods and services. Predictably, many are left without resources for a decent and dignified life.

We pray, therefore, for the strength to change our personal and public lives, to the end that there may be enough.

D. Justice through Sustainability

The sabbath and jubilee laws of the Hebrew tradition remind us that we may not press creation relentlessly in an effort to maximize productivity (Exodus 20:8-11; Leviticus 25). *The principle of sustainability means providing an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.*

Protection of species and their habitats, preservation of clean land and water, reduction of wastes, care of the land—these are priorities. But production of basic goods and services, equitable distribution, accessible markets, stabilization of population, quality education, full employment—these are priorities as well.

We recognize the obstacles to sustainability. Neither economic growth that ignores environmental cost nor conservation of nature that ignores human cost is sustainable. Both will result in injustice and, eventually, environmental degradation. We know that a healthy economy can exist only within a healthy environment, but that it is difficult to promote both in our decisions.

The principle of sustainability summons our church, in its global work with poor people, to pursue sustainable development strategies. It summons our church to support U.S. farmers who are turning to sustainable methods, and to encourage industries to produce sustainably. It summons each of us, in every aspect of our lives, to behave in ways that are consistent with the long-term sustainability of our planet.

We pray, therefore, for the creativity and dedication to live more gently with the earth.

V. COMMITMENTS OF THIS CHURCH

We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America answer the call to justice and commit ourselves to its principles—participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability. In applying the principles to specific situations, we face decisions made difficult by human limitation and sin. We act, not because we are certain of the outcome but because we are confident of our salvation in Christ.

Human behavior may change through economic incentive, guilt about the past, or fear about the future. But as people of biblical faith, who live together in trust and hope, our primary motivation is the call to be God's caregivers and to do justice.

We celebrate the vision of hope and justice for creation, and dedicate ourselves anew. We will act out of the conviction that, as the Holy Spirit renews our minds and hearts, we also must reform our habits and social structures.

A. As Individual Christians

As members of this church, we commit ourselves to personal life styles that contribute to the health of the environment. Many organizations provide materials to guide us in examining possibilities and making changes appropriate to our circumstances.

We challenge ourselves, particularly the economically secure, to tithe environmentally. Tithers would reduce their burden on the earth's bounty by producing ten percent less in waste, consuming ten percent less in non-renewable resources, and contributing the savings to earthcare efforts. Environmental tithing also entails giving time to learn about environmental problems and to work with others toward solutions.

B. As a Worshiping and Learning Community

1. The Congregation as a Creation Awareness Center

Each congregation should see itself as a center for exploring scriptural and theological foundations for caring for creation.

Awareness can be furthered by many already in our midst, for example: Native people, who often have a special understanding of human intimacy with the earth; scientists, engineers, and technicians, who help us to live by the wisdom of God in creation; experts in conservation and protection of the environment; and those who tend the land and sea. We also will learn from people suffering the severe impact of environmental degradation.

2. Creation Emphases in the Church Year

Congregations have various opportunities during the year to focus on creation. Among these are Thanksgiving, harvest festivals, and blessings of fields, waters, and plants and animals. Many congregations observe Earth Day or Soil and Water Stewardship Week. As a church body, we designate the Second Sunday after Pentecost as Stewardship of Creation Sunday, with appropriate readings (as a development of the traditional Rogationtide).

3. Education and Communication

This church will encourage those who develop liturgical, preaching, and educational materials that celebrate God's creation. Expanded curricula, for use in the many contexts of Christian education, will draw upon existing materials. We will promote reporting on the environment by church publications, and encourage coverage of this church's environmental concerns in public media.

4. Programs throughout This Church

This church commends the environmental education taking place through synodical and regional efforts; camps and outdoor ministries; colleges, seminaries, and continuing education events; and the churchwide Hunger Program. We especially commend this church's Department for Environmental Stewardship in the Division for Church in Society, for its network of caregivers, its advice to church members and institutions on innovative caregiving, and its materials for use in environmental auditing.

C. As a Committed Community

As congregations and other expressions of this church, we will seek to incorporate the principles of sufficiency and sustainability in our life. We will advocate the environmental tithe, and we will take other measures that work to limit consumption and reduce wastes. We will, in our budgeting and investment of church funds, demonstrate our care for creation. We will undertake environmental audits and follow through with checkups to ensure our continued commitment.

D. As a Community of Moral Deliberation

As congregations and other expressions of this church, we will model the principle of participation. We will welcome the interaction of differing views and experiences in our discussion of environmental issues such as:

- ♦ nuclear and toxic waste dumps;
- ♦ logging in ancient growth forests;
- ♦ personal habits in food consumption;
- ♦ farming practices;
- ♦ treatment of animals in livestock production, laboratory research, and hunting;
- ♦ land-use planning; and
- ♦ global food, development, and population questions.

We will examine how environmental damage is influenced by racism, sexism, and classism, and how the environmental crisis in turn exacerbates racial, gender, and class discrimination. We will include in our deliberation people who feel and suffer with issues, whose economic security is at stake, or who have expertise in the natural and social sciences.

We will play a role in bringing together parties in conflict, not only members of this church but also members of society at large. This church's widespread presence and credibility provide us a unique opportunity to mediate, to resolve conflict, and to move toward consensus.

E. As an Advocate

The principles of participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability will shape our advocacy—in neighborhoods and regions, nationally and internationally. Our advocacy will continue in partnership, ecumenically and with others who share our concern for the environment.

Advocacy on behalf of creation is most compelling when done by informed individuals or local groups. We will encourage their communication with governments and private entities, attendance at public hearings, selective buying and investing, and voting.

We will support those designated by this church to advocate at state, national, and international levels. We will stand with those among us whose personal struggles for justice put them in lonely and vulnerable positions.

1. Private Sector

This church will engage in dialogue with corporations on how to promote justice for creation. We will converse with business leadership regarding the health of workers, consumers, and the environment. We will invite the insights and concerns of business leadership regarding responsible environmental actions. We will urge businesses to implement comprehensive environmental principles.

Government can use both regulations and market incentives to seek sustainability. We will foster genuine cooperation between the private and public sector in developing them.

2. Public Sector

This church will favor proposals and actions that address environmental issues in a manner consistent with the principles of participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability.

These proposals and actions will address: excessive consumption and human population pressures; international development, trade, and debt; ozone depletion; and climate change. They will seek: to protect species and their habitats; to protect and assure proper use of marine species; and to protect portions of the planet that are held in common, including the oceans and the atmosphere.

This church will support proposals and actions to protect and restore, in the United States and Caribbean, the quality of:

- ◆ natural and human habitats, including seas, wetlands, forests, wilderness, and urban areas;
- ◆ air, with special concern for inhabitants of urban areas;
- ◆ water, especially drinking water, groundwater, polluted runoff, and industrial and municipal waste; and
- ◆ soil, with special attention to land use, toxic waste disposal, wind and water erosion, and preservation of farmland amid urban development.

This church will seek public policies that allow people to participate fully in decisions affecting their own health and livelihood. We will be in solidarity with

people who directly face environmental hazards from toxic materials, whether in industry, agriculture, or the home. We will insist on an equitable sharing of the costs of maintaining a healthy environment.

This church will advance international acceptance of the principles of participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability, and encourage the United Nations in its caregiving role. We will collaborate with partners in the global church community, and learn from them in our commitment to care for God's creation.

CLAIMING THE PROMISE

Given the power of sin and evil in this world, as well as the complexity of environmental problems, we know we can find no "quick fix"—whether technological, economic, or spiritual. A sustainable environment requires a sustained effort from everyone.

The prospect of doing too little too late leads many people to despair. But as people of faith, captives of hope, and vehicles of God's promise, we face the crisis.

We claim the promise of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1), and join in the offertory prayer (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 109): "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

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