



# **The Web of Life, The Body of Christ: Our Shared Life and Moral Responsibility**

**Study Papers on the Environment, Poverty, and Sustainable Development, No. 1**

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Nearly every person in the world has heard about the environmental crisis. This is a crisis like no other. It is not “news” in the same way as an unexpected storm or drought. Some people believe the crisis is real. Others have doubts or deny it altogether. On a global scale, the environmental crisis is a disaster that seems to happen in slow-motion, yet its impact increases steadily and changes our lives in almost unthinkable ways. In any given region or community, this crisis may be felt profoundly in the scarcity of water, the decimation of coral reefs, or high rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases. Everyone is affected. This is true whether we live in rural areas, suburbs or cities, forests, deserts, or small islands. Our response to this crisis -- and we must respond -- will define the character of humankind in our present age. It reaches deeply into the soul of everyone, into the very heart of our spiritual lives and our faith. Everyone contributes to this crisis, and everyone can be part of the solution.

Today, the Spirit calls out renewed responsibility and love for the whole of God’s creation -- the web of life. As Christians, we also understand our lives together as being incorporated in the body of Christ. The body of Christ and the web of life are closely related. Faithful worship is proclaimed in word and deed, by love forgiveness, respect and justice, and the fulfillment of our God-given duty of environmental stewardship. Increasingly, Christians see the deteriorating condition of creation as a spiritual message and call to repentance, which requires us to do more than care for creation. We must take up the cross and be active, compassionate healers in a severely broken world, and we must do this now.

If you have doubt about this, then consider the thousands of scientific studies conducted by universities worldwide and the United Nations over many years. The environmental crisis is very real, and the web of life is unraveling at an alarming rate:

- \* one third of the world’s fish are facing extinction;
- \* two thirds of all birds are on the decline;
- \* one fourth of all forests have been destroyed in the last fifty years;
- \* the extinction rate among mammals today is one thousand times greater than it was during the Pleistocene Epoch (10,000 years ago).

If this is not convincing enough, then trust your God-given commonsense and the tangible evidence around you. The destruction of the earth’s ecosystems has been taking place for several hundred years, rapidly increasing in recent decades, and we know the causes: deforestation and climate change due to greenhouse gases and fossil fuels, high levels of consumption in developed countries, the pollution and overuse of freshwater, over fishing of the oceans, poorly planned economic development, and overpopulation, as well as militarism, economic exploitation, and outright greed. At

their root, the causes of widespread human suffering and environmental destruction are much the same, and where good intentions exist, a genuine vision of environmental stewardship may not be available or used as a reliable guide.

### **Biodiversity, The Web of Life, and God’s Creation**

As Christians, we understand the environmental crisis not so much as a problem to be solved, but a broken relationship that requires confession, redemption, and healing. Everyone must be involved -- exploiters and the exploited -- with the understanding that we must overcome these divisions, working together for the common good. The healing of our broken relationship draws us back to holy scripture, to the very beginning in Genesis, when God creates and blesses all the creatures and realms of creation, including humankind, giving us the responsibility of using nature’s resources for the benefit of all, while being good stewards so the web of life may flourish for the benefit of future generations.

To fulfill our stewardship responsibilities, we must recognize and respect the web of life in its magnificent diversity. Different cultures and peoples within the Anglican Communion and elsewhere have different conceptions of God’s creation. For example, among indigenous peoples, knowledge of the web of life is regarded as sacred knowledge. This is often not the view of “modern” educational systems, in which reliable knowledge is routinely seen as separate from the sacred. Even the meaning of “environment” in scientific and theological usage can create misleading impressions. Often the word “environment” focuses attention on the landscape or a person’s “surroundings,” which suggests that our concern is independent of humankind. In truth, the lives of all beings are woven together by many kinds of relationships -- geological, biological, social, economic, cultural, political, and religious. These relationships make God’s creation one web of life -- whose flesh and blood were Christ’s body, in whose water he was baptized, and which produced the food he ate and the air he breathed. Our sacred, moral obligation and is to care for humankind and the whole web of life. Ultimately, these responsibilities are inseparable. To show respect for people is to care for the environment where they live. To show respect for the environment is to care for the people whose lives form part of a larger ecosystem. Either way, we can fulfill the God-given responsibility of stewardship for the earth, whose well-being has been entrusted to us.

It may be surprising, but “ecosystem,” which is a scientific word, comes closer to the theological meaning of God’s creation than does “environment.” Ecosystems involve relationships in the broad sense of the earth as our common “household” or “home.” Similarly, the environmental crisis today requires us to open our hearts and minds to much larger understanding of family ties. As Christians, people everywhere are brothers and sisters -- all people being made

in God's image. Christ led St. Francis to live a life of poverty, helping those in need, and to call God's creatures, the earth and the sky, his "brothers" and "sisters." His calling, for us, stands as a prophetic vision. When one person or community suffers, where one habitat or creature suffers, everyone suffers. We may be unaware of these familial bonds due to great distance and lack of communication. We may deny them because of prejudice, arrogance, or misunderstanding. But the Holy Spirit, who lives within us and weaves together the web of life into one body of life, prays for the healing of all.

The diversity of life is the best indicator of the health and well-being of God's creation. This is true because, from an ecological perspective, the diversity of life is the fullness of God's creation on earth. The diversity of life is filled with the life-giving Spirit that sustains human life. Without it, we could not exist. The diversity of life includes not only ecosystems and species of living beings, but also cultural and linguistic diversity among the world's peoples. Indigenous and traditional peoples, most significantly, regard their ecological knowledge as sacred. They have done so through countless generations. Today, they struggle to survive, while preserving their cultural heritage along with the ecosystems where they live. The wisdom of their sacred traditions, suggests that biodiversity is inseparable from cultural diversity, just as all peoples are part of God's creation and worthy of respect and justice.

Biological and cultural diversity make the creativity of God's love known through the web of life. Its destruction testifies to the most severe injustice and estrangement from God's love. Scientists believe we are reaching a threshold, and if we cross it without changing our relationship to God's creation, the capacity of the web of life as a whole to regenerate will be severely compromised. This is why the rate and depth of the present crisis is so alarming. The diversity of life as we know it, including human life, could be put at risk. Although no one knows for sure when this might happen, this is a risk that should never be taken. We were called to be stewards of God's creation, not gamblers with its survival and ours.

### **The Values of Biological and Cultural Diversity**

Critical decisions must be made on every level of human life -- locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally -- and they must be made now. These decisions must concern fundamental spiritual values and how to practice environmental stewardship, instead of whether it is important. In making these decisions, conflicts inevitably arise between the necessity of human use -- what ethicists call "instrumental value" -- and the value of nature itself, apart from human use, or "intrinsic value". The holy scriptures provide clear evidence for the sacred foundation of intrinsic and instrumental values. In the first and second chapters of Genesis, God blesses the successive realms or "days" of creation and calls each of them "good." God

gives humankind the responsibility to care for creation, using its resources wisely. However, in the modern world, the intrinsic goodness of creation has taken second place to values based on human use. The extent that local ecosystems, traditional communities, and indigenous peoples have been destroyed by global economic and political forces since the colonial era is the measure of this injustice based on an ethical and spiritual distortion. Increasingly, the value of God's creation is defined by its financial worth on the global marketplace. In truth, no part of creation can be truly owned. From a scriptural point of view (Psalms 24: 1-2), laws concerning ownership are provisional, temporary agreements based on the sacred trust of stewardship:

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it:  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*

A sustainable balance must be found that meets the basic survival needs of people and honors the universal human right to exist, while preserving ecosystems for their own sake and for future generations. The conflict currently taking place about the meaning of sustainability -- Who will pay? Who will benefit? Who will suffer? -- is an indication of the severity of the ecological crisis as well as the emerging awareness of it globally.

"Development" (and "progress") must be understood in more than material terms. Ethical development is a necessity. With respect to basic environmental stewardship, the need for ethical development crosscuts our common divisions between "developed" and "developing" nations. Many so-called developed nations pursue political and economic policies that take everyone down an unsustainable and destructive path. The clear need for ethical development points directly to the leadership role Christians can play -- once we have reclaimed our own stewardship tradition -- by working cooperatively with leaders of other faiths who are seeking similar ecological visions within their own traditions.

### **Human Empowerment and the Web of Life**

For more than fifty years, the damage caused by environmental exploitation and destruction has been increasingly brought to the attention of the public by scientists, environmental organizations, and more recently by the religious community -- often working together at the United Nations. Almost every aspect of the United Nations' work relates to it -- from the Universal Declaration on Human Rights to the Earth Summit's Agenda 21, and more recently, the Millennium Development Goals. The political and economic forces found at the source of this exploitation have been operating for centuries, as known by the majority of the world and the greater portion of the Anglican Communion. People living under the justice conditions of economic and political exploitation know it all too well.

They know it in the dissolution of families and whole communities, decimating poverty, the loss of human rights, cultural knowledge and traditions, the destruction of local ecosystems, and more. Despite the fact that the historical period of colonialism has largely passed, the ecological damage perpetuated today is still shaped by the same exploitative worldview, and its impact on the web of life has not appreciably changed. In fact, it may have worsened in some respects.

It is essential that the Anglican Communion create wide-ranging ministries in environmental stewardship and sustainable development. Humanitarian relief should always be a priority of the church, yet we must complement this by actively re-creating the web of life at every level of its existence. Fr. Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest and arguably the foremost prophetic voice of the modern era, has said “the human community is part of the earth community.” The truth of his words is a spiritual remembrance of creation itself, of which we are a part, and our sacred duty and trust to be stewards of God’s divine work.

With this in our minds and hearts, we must come together to discover our Christian responsibility of faithful stewardship once again. This is the most critical issue of our age -- everywhere and for everyone. We can and we must restore ecosystems where they have been damaged or destroyed. We can and we must empower local communities to undertake this sacred work. We can and we must engage in and support regional, national, and international strategies for sustainable development. Of these three, local community empowerment has proven to be the most effective step people can take towards sustainable living. In practice, effective environmental ministry of any kind is dependent on communities willing to take up the struggle. Often, this involves communities engaging difficult issues and defining in their own terms how they can contribute to the solutions we all seek. Congregational life happens within communities. Sustainable communities and congregations are created by caring, loving, committed individuals who are willing to find a common vision rooted in God’s love for the whole creation with all its biological and cultural diversity. Our suffering world needs people who care about all human needs, healthy homes and productive livelihoods, who care for the rivers and seas, the air we all breathe, and the food we share with thanksgiving -- who see the possibility of God’s Kingdom in our generation and in the future.

## Suggested Reading

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