



WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE EARTH

An Ecological Approach to Community Organizing
In Neighborhoods, Congregations, and Bioregions

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THE
RENE DUBOS
CONSORTIUM
FOR SACRED ECOLOGY

AT THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE

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The real difficulty is in developing the social will to reach these desirable ecological goals. This requires an attitude similar to the Franciscan love of nature. It requires also the cultivation of the uplifting qualities that all human beings can display when they establish spiritual connection with the earth and indeed with the cosmos as a whole.

— Rene Dubos

As we approach the twenty-first century, humankind faces a challenge of unprecedented proportion: Our task is to reverse the destruction of global ecological systems by restoring humankind's proper relationship with the earth. To meet such a challenge, individuals, communities, and institutions must contribute to a process of creative cultural and spiritual transformation. This process must touch our lives both inwardly, to the deepest core of our being, and outwardly to encompass the planetary scale of life's interconnected web. The mission of the Rene Dubos Consortium for Sacred Ecology is to facilitate such a transformation.

The Rene Dubos Consortium was established in 1992 by The Very Reverend James Parks Morton, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Coordinated by Jeff Gollhofer, the Consortium is the network of collaborative programs which shape the Cathedral's ongoing ministry in ecology and spirituality:

The Gaia Institute

Paul Mankiewicz, Ph.D. and Julie Mankiewicz, Ph.D., Dirs.

The Lindisfarne Association

William Irwin Thompson, Ph.D., Dir.

The National Religious Partnership for the Environment

Paul Gorman, Ex. Dir.

The Northeast Environmental Education Project

The Rev. Canon Jeff Gollhofer, Ph.D., Dir.

The Upper West Side Recycling Center

Jeff Twine, Dir.

Environmental Partnership of West Side Institutions in Manhattan

The Very Rev. James Parks Morton, Convener



More than twenty years ago, several pioneers of the modern environmental movement -- well-known figures such as Rene Dubos, Gregory Bateson, and Margaret Mead -- based their research and even their lives on the vital connection between ecology and spirituality. It is less well-known that they turned their attention not only to the grander issues of their day and ours, but also to the meaning of seemingly ordinary gatherings of people that we all know so well and take-for-granted. They did this because they saw great ecological significance in them.

Seen in that light, gatherings of any kind (family meals, civic group meetings, prayer circles, therapy groups, and so on) become extremely important events. That may seem to be a much too obvious comment, at least on the surface, but its simplicity speaks to some deeper and also more "ordinary" issues which lie close to the heart of our planetary crisis. The visionaries of the environmental movement established on the basis of scientific methods what spiritual teachers of many traditions have known as a matter of the heart -- that *how we conduct ourselves in daily, face-to-face encounters is the principal doorway toward spiritual and ecological transformation.* This is especially true of meetings that have community organizing for the environment as their purpose.

Their insight has a direct bearing on a familiar dilemma in the church. Our dilemma is best described in the following way. First, we all know that giving talks and workshops and offering reasonably good advice can be effective ways to raise awareness of our environmental problems and their relation to spirituality. Second, we would all probably agree that the practical outcome of these activities will be minimal unless congregations, communities, and other groups can then come together in honest, mutually supportive, and spiritually energizing ways. And third, many of our good program ideas never seem to materialize simply because we don't always come together in that fashion, and as a result, we fail to organize ourselves effectively and nourish our souls. This is a humbling opinion, but it is often true, and it demonstrates once again just how important occasions of meeting together actually are.

This does not mean that we lack the necessary spiritual grace and intent to accomplish good works, because we do have such an intent for the most part. Over the years, however, we may have learned some habits of thought and behavior which often contradict what the heart and soul truly desire. Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, the high value American culture has given to economic freedom and industrial development over the years has been fueled by the destructive impact of overdone self-gratification, consumption instead of stewardship, and the belief that nature should be dominated rather than cared for. These are the morally dubious ideals of "progress" and they have affected almost every part of our lives: at home, in the

educational system, in government, and in church. The pervasive nature of these values should remind us that working together for the earth is not primarily a matter of allocating tasks and resources. It is not simply another goal to be accomplished. Environmental ministry is, above all else, a process of spiritual transformation.

There are obviously many other reasons for the sometimes frustrating difficulties that arise in our work and ministry, but the ecological significance of how we relate to one another in the most basic ways cannot be understated. And let's face it: Relationships within the human community and with the larger Earth community are something we, in the church, claim to have some knowledge of. I believe the most fundamental contribution that the church can make through its environmental ministry is to make explicit just how much the future of the Earth's ecosystems depends on what we do, say, and feel whenever we gather in the presence of others, the earth, and God. Can you think of a time or place when we are not gathered in the presence of them? This includes our behavior on every level of scale: from the smallest and most informal settings to the largest and most ceremonially elaborate, and from table manners and everyday hospitality to behavior in corporate boardrooms and courts of law.

Even in the most commonplace and routine gatherings, we communicate to each other very subtle, but powerful messages about what we value and regard as meaningful. When we gather together as families, communities, in the workplace, and as the church, our actions convey meaning with clear and obvious as well as sometimes hidden ecological consequences. This is true whether or not we realize it at the time. Ecology is about how we live and conduct ourselves everywhere. It is about meaning and value -- the meaning and value of life and our place and responsibilities in God's Creation.

The overall themes underlying this essay are respectful living, justice, equality, and wholeness as they apply to our interactions within ecosystems (of which we are an intrinsic part) and with each other (each of us being a part of one another). These themes remind us that the environmental problems we face today are deeply rooted in the character of our political life, religious structures, economic institutions, families, and psyches. Finding solutions will mean looking both deeply within ourselves and broadly across the horizon. We can take significant steps toward realizing these solutions by becoming more aware of how we organize and conduct ourselves in environmental meetings held in connection with the church (or anywhere). Ten suggestions for these gatherings are outlined below and briefly discussed in the body of the text:

- 1) Find a Workable Independence
- 2) Be With Nature
- 3) Think in Terms of Scale



- 4) Be flexible with Agendas and Goals
- 5) Encourage a Diversity of Perspectives
- 6) Honor the Wisdom of the Community
- 7) Stay with Feeling
- 8) Find Consensus When Making Decisions
- 9) Honor Conflict
- 10) Respect the Group's Spiritual Heart

Each suggestion has a conceptual and practical foundation in the theory and practice of ecology, and they are explored in greater detail below. They have been discussed and exemplified not only at meetings of the Environmental Partnership of West Side Institutions at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, but also at numerous gatherings of the New England Bioregional Network -- so the comments appearing here represent, however imperfectly, the collective experience of many people.¹

These ideas are concerned, in part, with kinds of behavior we may have learned either in the church, church-related settings, or at work and at home -- especially in childhood. That is important to consider because spiritual transformation in the service of God and ecology is almost entirely dependent on how we actually conduct ourselves in the presence of other people and the earth, rather than solely on what we say or "officially" teach about it (although that is important too). Spiritual traditions from virtually every culture say that real teaching and learning is accomplished by the examples we set. This is also evident in the fact that some of the most ecologically-sensitive people have little (if any) awareness of the "knowledge" that they already have.

In my own view, these suggestions have a deeper meaning which concerns the nature of the critique which some environmentalists have launched against Christianity generally -- as being a religion which has contributed significantly to our environmental crisis because it is based on beliefs that contradict ecology (e.g., "an otherworldly religion," "dominion" theology, etc.). There is some truth in this critique, and much of our work in the church has been to recover the ecological basis of Christianity and to demonstrate convincingly that such an alternative tradition(s) actually exists.

That, however, is not precisely the meaning that I'm speaking about, which has to do with the historical emphasis on "right belief" (orthodoxy) rather than "right action" (orthopraxy). This distinction calls attention to the fact that we might, in the church, teach the right thing about ecology as "beliefs" and still fail to take the more important step of putting those beliefs into practice. What has sometimes been called "eco-spirituality" is, almost by definition, a matter of right action (rooted in sound doctrine) -- and that is why the conduct of behavior in meetings and gatherings of all kinds is so crucial. That is also why the often taken-for-granted ways of conducting meetings in church-settings (and elsewhere) are

just as important as the "official beliefs" that we have historically taught in those meetings. Eco-feminists have been real leaders in this area by emphasizing consensus-building and non-hierarchical styles of leadership. Some of the suggestions explored here are very similar to eco-feminist as well as bioregional thinking. The following discussion should make this all the more apparent.

Find a Workable Independence

Ultimately, the purpose of environmental organizing is to discover and put into practice new ways of being with each other and the earth. Almost by definition, this requires work on a grass-roots level in congregations and communities. For that reason, it is vital that church-based environmental groups find a workable degree of independence from other groups and structures of the church, for this will allow the highest level of communication and trust. This might seem to be an unexpected and off-putting thing to say, but it is really a very practical matter. It is meant to encourage maximum flexibility in the content of discussion and the structure of meetings at a time when the church faces a large number of complex, hotly-debated, and sometimes painful issues. In short, we need some time and objective distance to discover more clearly what ecology means for the church. This will encourage the growth of genuine grass-roots ideas and organizational styles, not to mention the emergence of new visions (and the rediscovery of old visions), without the fear of being disloyal.

This does not mean that we should postpone doing a tremendous amount of ministry within our congregations and ecclesiastical structures -- in fact, the opposite is the case. What is at stake is something more subtle and delicate. Ecology-based ministry is relatively new, and this means that it is still in its infancy. What I am saying is that we should be very careful in how we nurture the child. Without a doubt, this particular child is at a stage when it needs some room to grow and develop.

The prevailing assumption of the 60's (on the political left) and of the 80's and 90's (on the right) has been that institutions are virtually the enemy. This has always been an overly-simplified view and it is not mine in any event. However, larger institutions exist for reasons which are different from those of grass-roots or community-based groups. Also, institutions often operate along strict hierarchical lines in terms of decision-making, as opposed to the more informal consensus-building approach. Institutional hierarchies are very important as sources of unity, stability, and moral authority, but they have no monopoly on them. Individuals and communities are also sources of moral authority. This means that institutions cannot possibly solve every problem or every kind of problem that challenges the human community and God's Creation.



It is also true that there are different kinds of hierarchies. Some of them rely on consensus-building in the decisions they make, so it's not necessarily helpful to lump them all together in our thinking.

Still, it is commonly assumed by some of the environmental community that hierarchies encourage leadership styles which are not rooted in ecology -- especially when flexibility and openness are diminished. The study of cultures confirms this opinion. Even small groups that work on the basis of equality can be shaped by hidden (or not so hidden) leadership styles that can discourage spiritual growth for some people. This often happens despite the fact that no one intends it. *The point is that large structures and community-based groups are different kinds of creatures which we create and support for different kinds of reasons. Our goal in environmental ministry is not to oppose one to the other, but to clarify their respective purposes so mutual support and collaboration can be achieved.*

There is one special reason why environmental groups and networks should maintain a degree of independence, and it is quite important. There are a great many spiritually-minded people, deeply committed to ecology, who desire no real connection with organized religion. If church-based environmental groups become too permeated with church agendas and structures, as environmental as they might be at times, then those people will feel excluded and find their own spiritual and ecological support in other places. Efforts in the church to build eco-spiritual awareness desperately need them, but God's Creation needs them even more. They are very knowledgeable and energetic, and they have great ideas -- not to mention their Spirit.

Maintaining a degree of independence is also crucial because it will allow grass-roots groups of any kind (neighborhood, congregational, regional) to mediate new ideas and energy into existing ecclesiastical structures in an effective way. But for this mediating function to work effectively, grass-roots groups must be clearly connected to the larger structures -- otherwise there will be no communication whatsoever. Discovering the best kind of relationship (and maintaining it over time) will require collective wisdom and a great deal of discussion concerning the environmental group's many and sometimes changing purposes.

Be With Nature

It should go without saying that we must acknowledge the existence of living beings other than people during meetings. Environmental stewardship gatherings are often and strangely anthropocentric (regarding humankind as the center of Creation). Talking excessively about the church is one example of how this particular institution can become self-absorbed, and this is a good example of institutional

anthropocentrism. Of course, discussions of that kind are entirely appropriate in other contexts -- sometimes there is real church business to attend to. Most of the time, however, this is only a habit, and not a good one in the context of ecology.

To counteract this tendency, encourage people to talk about themselves and the environmental ministry in which they are engaged. Drawing attention to our relationship to the earth is neither self-centered nor human-centered, but it is personal and that is what we want. Good news and bad news about the environment, or perhaps reflections on a person's relationship with animals or the sky are all good examples. Becoming more aware of the presence of nature in meetings is essential, and it can be easily accomplished during openings, at other appropriate times, or spontaneously as people feel moved. *The best thing to do, of course, is to go outdoors, be with the earth, and learn about the ecological and spiritual realities where we live and where other beings live.*

Think in Terms of Scale

Scale is an important component of ecology: the scale of molecules, of organisms, of communities of organisms, of households, small human settlements, cities, watersheds, bioregions, and the biosphere. Thinking in terms of scale is valuable for a number of reasons. In the context of organizing, it helps people understand just how economically, spiritually, and ecologically interdependent we all are, especially in neighboring households, congregations, and communities. Scale also brings a crucial dimension to discussions of strategies for environmental ministry. For example, if a neighborhood group wants to influence public policy with regard to an incinerator, then it should form associations with other environmental, health, and community-based groups within the geographical region affected. Watersheds and bioregions are a naturally occurring ecological units within which congregations can form very effective environmental stewardship groups and networks. This will require thinking of the landscape not in terms of grids imposed by us, but in terms of nature's own organizational features. *The central idea here is that different kinds of environmental issues often require organizing on different levels of scale. We need flexibility in how we organize ourselves for ministry -- there is more than one way to get organized and more than one way to do environmental ministry.*

Be Flexible with Agendas and Goals

It is very easy to assume that we already know what "ecology" and "environmental stewardship" mean, but generally speaking, this is a false assumption. Everyone is learning "how to live" in God's Creation. To assume that we know what to do misleads us into believing that the question



of "how to be" has been solved within ourselves. Ecological living probably has more to do with learning "how to be" than anything else, but "doing" is important too. For that reason, group meetings should play down agenda, without excluding it. Having an overly-structured or controlled agenda implies that we already know what is significant and what we should be doing. Sometimes we do; sometimes we don't. Again, flexibility is crucial.

To learn how to be in each other's presence with grace and generosity is to take a significant step toward learning how to live respectfully as a part of Creation. Very often, over-dependence on agenda signifies a need to control experience when, in actuality, we are simply (or not so simply) insecure with ourselves. And everyone knows that structured agenda often means the imposition of one person's will onto another. For many people, learning to be with others without an agenda is similar to learning to breathe in a healthy way -- with a sense of inner rest in the flow of God's own breath moving within our bodies. Learning to breathe with ease and relaxation is a major step along the spiritual path and it works wonders for the organism.

On the other hand, it is important to have a clear sense of purpose and the capacity to set and carry out goals. *The key is to know the difference between times when they are truly needed and called for and when they are serving other purposes that have little to do with ecology and spirituality.*

Encourage a Diversity of Perspectives

Learning the art of listening and developing a greater capacity for trust are at the heart of respecting and caring for Creation. In the context of group process, the encouragement of diverse perspectives and their free expression is an effective way to build up the human community. This is important in connection with a wide range of perspectives: religious, economic, cultural, racial, generational, gender-related, and political. The human community, after all, must be strengthened in order for us to have the capacity for genuine stewardship. From an ecological standpoint, a strong community is an environmentally sustainable community. Sustainable communities nurture emerging forms of unity by honoring the fullness of diversity expressed among their members. Some of the most promising environmental ministries today seek to "build the capacity for sustainable living" within communities, and this means working on the fundamentals of being and working together in respectful ways.

An equally important point concerns the relationship between human diversity and biodiversity. Respecting a diversity of perspectives in group settings helps, often implicitly, to develop intellectual and emotional skills which encourage people to respect all of Creation's diversity.

Inclusivity and respect are paramount. In other words, if we teach, in whatever way, that there is only one valid point of view (or even a few), then we are also teaching, by implication, that nature has little or no value. This is the case because it is not really true to say "Creation has diversity" -- instead, "Creation is diversity." *If we fail to respect diversity in the human community, then we will do the same with the Earth community.*

Honor the Wisdom of the Community

People already know quite a lot about ecology, but in the form of intuitive, taken-for-granted, and commonsense knowledge. We might not think of this kind of "knowing" or "feeling" as ecological, but it often is. Expertise may be useful in selected situations. However, the academic model of education, which the church has generally adopted and effectively employed over the years, is not always well-suited to raising ecological or spiritual awareness. A strong argument can be made that the academic model is disempowering when it fails to recognize the existence and importance of commonsense wisdom. In some situations, group process organized around the "expert" will only serve to validate the expert's identity instead of helping the group to find its own integrity and empowerment. Thus, it is especially important for the group to evoke what individuals already know, especially when people assume that they know very little about ecology. Generally, we all know in our hearts how to live respectfully, but our culture may not offer many opportunities to express it in our minds, bodies, and communities. The nature of the challenge before us is to make those opportunities a reality.

Stay with Feeling

People are often reluctant to express their feelings about a variety of subjects in group settings. With regard to ecology and spirituality, it is crucial that group facilitators give special attention to unexpressed feelings and sources of denial. It is, of course, easy to gloss over difficult or unexpressed feelings in groups. Generally speaking, raising ecological awareness is not a matter of more information, but of bringing a healing dimension to group encounters. *When people become empowered to "be themselves" in the company of others, then they can readily transfer their new sense of "being alive" to more expansive relationships with God's Creation.*

Find Consensus When Making Decisions

Consensus-building is crucial to the well-being and longevity of environmental groups, and it can sometimes be a very subtle process. There are occasions, I believe, when consensus does not solve problems and when it may not be appropriate. A good rule of thumb is that when consensus cannot be found,



then the issue before the group is either not really a problem, or the group is not ready to address the issue with greater powers of heart, mind, or spirit. It is never good to "push the river" in these situations. To encourage consensus-building in small groups, overly-structured and hierarchical ways of being together must be minimized. For example, each meeting can be facilitated by a different person, so that everyone has a chance to participate in diverse ways. Rotation of this kind helps to build trust, not only among the group, but also within individuals. It is especially important for the group as a whole to decide on topics of discussion for subsequent meetings. Topics for agenda should never be imposed, even implicitly, by a few people. They should be arrived at through participatory discussions.

Honor Conflict

The principle of consensus does not negate the positive value of conflict. In practice, consensus-building is dependent on the freedom to express conflicting points of view. Honoring conflict illustrates the positive role of diversity, even when people have strongly held opinions about issues like justice, economics, politics, and spirituality. This is particularly true when some members of environmental groups choose to pursue strategies based on direct or indirect political action. For a number of reasons, others may prefer activities which are less visible and less closely tied to the public arena. It is important to realize that private prayer and public action can have a great deal in common. Praying within the privacy of one's heart can be a form of action -- perhaps more subtle, but no less effective than our public witness.

On the other hand, it is crucial that environmental ministry be expressed in politically-charged, public settings, and people who are actively involved in this form of ministry need emotional and material support from the community. Issues of justice, particularly in connection with environmental racism, lie at the heart of ecology, and they cannot be separated from any full understanding of spirituality. Conflict may sometimes arise between people choosing political and non-political expressions of environmental ministry; however, there is no inevitable or necessary reason for this conflict to become divisive. The group's integrity is not dependent on everyone doing the same things or interpreting the world in the same ways. *Environmental ministry has a large number of creative expressions, and there are many diverse ways for everyone to make meaningful contributions -- more ways than we can possibly imagine!*

Honoring conflict also helps people to overcome fears about differences of any kind. The fear of difference is closely tied to the fear of "the other." Those parts of experience we most fear are often what we attempt to dominate through control. This applies as much to our relationship with nature as it does to human affairs, so learning to let go of those fears is an

important dimension of environmental ministry. The ultimate purpose of honoring conflict is to encourage the group to find higher forms of unity within its own diversity, and that helps everyone to realize their place in the diversity which is God's Creation.

Respect the Group's Spiritual Heart

We all know that when "two or three are gathered together," then the presence of Christ is there. Although this can be interpreted in many ways, it implies that *any group of people has the potential of being a genuine community -- that is, a group with a "collective heart," sensitive to justice, equity, and respectful living.* This potential should be regarded as a practical fact in group meetings. Whenever difficult feelings are being expressed or conflict arises, facilitators should encourage everyone present to look beyond any hidden fears and to rest internally within the group's heart. This helps everyone to develop deeper "ways of being" which apply equally to human encounters and to relationships with the earth.

Concluding Comment

Environmental ministry, at its heart, is a process of spiritual transformation and this occurs more by "letting go" and "letting be" than by simply hearing information discussed. History suggests that nothing genuinely meaningful can be "implemented" or "imposed" in human affairs; and in practice, self-conscious efforts to apply the principles discussed here may be self-defeating. It is best, in most cases, simply to convene meetings in the spirit of openness and respect for everyone present. It is usually helpful to ask the group, after the fact, to reflect on the nature of the meeting itself and what it (the meeting) communicated about learning to live more peacefully and respectfully. This, of course, can be a humbling experience, but most often it is an extremely beneficial thing to do. We all do this kind of reflection anyway in the privacy of our own thoughts and feelings, but the point here is to take the reflective process a step further by asking questions about the ecological and spiritual basis of the meeting itself.

One final note: Meetings are exceedingly important events. Through them, we communicate to each other very subtle, but powerful messages about what we value and regard as meaningful. Ecology is about meaning and value -- the meaning and value of God's Creation.

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ENDNOTES

¹The Environmental Partnership of West Side Institutions in Manhattan (formed in 1994) is an association of neighborhood institutions and community-based groups whose purpose is to promote new visions of urban life in the City of Manhattan and to facilitate concrete programs based on environmental sustainability. Current partnership members include The American Museum of Natural History, American Youth Hostels, Barnard College, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Cathedral School, Columbia University, Community Board Nine, The Environmental Action Coalition, The Gaia Institute, Hunter College, The InterChurch Center, International House, Jewish Theological Seminary, Manhattan School of Music, The Morningside Alliance, The New York Urban League, St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, Teacher's College, and The Upper West Side Recycling Center.

Begun in 1992, The New England Bioregional Network is an ongoing church-based gathering of the environmental leadership of the various Episcopal dioceses of New England. Its purpose is to promote a bioregional vision of ministry through leadership training, ecological education, and mutual support. Participating Dioceses include Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Western Massachusetts. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine originally served as the network convener and now works as a participating member.

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