

WHY CARE FOR THE EARTH?

The Case for Religious Action
on Behalf of the Environment



By Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition

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The Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition is an interfaith nonprofit organization based in the Kansas City area that partners with, encourages, and assists faith groups to preach, teach, model, and advocate for sustainable living and ecological justice for all creation. We offer:

- 1. Training and ongoing support to help your congregation start and maintain an effective Green Team***
- 2. Assistance in “greening” your congregation’s facilities and operations.***
- 3. Resources and programs for clergy and laity that highlight the spiritual and religious connection to Earth stewardship.***

For more information, please visit www.ssckc.org or contact us at 913-677-8672.

Introduction

The Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition (SSC) believes that there is a spiritual, religious, and moral imperative to be faithful stewards of the Earth and its resources. SSC believes that communities of faith have an important role to play in responding to the environmental challenges currently facing the planet.

To some, this statement is self-evident. For others, the connection between religious practice and caring for creation is harder to discern. Some will argue that involving their congregation in environmentalism is too politically charged and potentially alienating to some of their members. They might also feel that it is simply beyond the scope of their spiritual mission. To these individuals, environmentalism and religion simply don't mix.

This document outlines why faith and ecology DO mix. It provides the foundation and rationale for why people of faith and their institutions are called to be at the forefront of caring for the Earth.

These are the premises that underlie this document:

1. **The environmental crisis is real.** Human-caused exploitation of the planet is seriously compromising all of its eco systems, causing suffering and harm to humans and all life. The poor and weakest are often the most adversely affected, and future generations will pay the highest price for this environmental degradation.
2. **People of faith are compelled to take action to protect the Earth.** Although the science continues to evolve, we don't need to know everything about an issue before beginning to take pragmatic steps. The great religions of the world call on their adherents to care for one another and the gifts bestowed by the Creator. Therefore, there is a spiritual, religious, and moral imperative to be good stewards of the Earth and its resources.
3. **Congregations can make a significant difference in protecting the Earth.** Faith communities are uniquely positioned and qualified to do significant work on behalf of the environment through their power to educate, activate, and advocate.

Proving that the environmental crisis is real is beyond the scope of this paper. There is ample and readily available information about this subject for the reader to reach his or her own conclusion. For our purposes, we take it as a given that human activity on the planet is causing harm in a multitude of ways that might not be reversible if we don't begin to make significant changes.

Given the current alarming state of environmental challenges facing our planet, this document will address what people of faith can and should do about it from the perspective of their faith and their ability to effect change in and through the power and influence of their congregations.

Part 1: People of Faith are Called to Take Action to Protect the Earth

A. The Perspective of History—Religion’s Involvement in Social Change

It is not enough to love God; we must love what God loves, which is all of His Creation. ~ Dr. Marcus Borg, Biblical Scholar and Author

A church that does not provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that? ~ Archbishop Oscar Romero, El Salvador Martyr

Historically, religion has played a central role in social and political change. In the US, since the mid-1800s, four instances of major social change have been fueled by religion and people of faith: the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and the civil rights and peace movements. More recent examples include the African church’s anti-apartheid efforts and the liberation theologians of Latin America social/political reform.

In each instance where religious institutions led the cause of social reform, the pattern has been similar: Initial rejection of the cause followed by a period of reflection on the institution’s role and then an expanded definition of religious activism that embraces the cause as one that falls within the institution’s purview. This process is natural, as the challenges of each era are different from those that confronted the founders of our religions. For example, religious teachings guide us in how we should treat our neighbors. However, religious founders could not have foreseen the way the definition of “neighbor” has changed over the millennia.

Today’s central environmental challenge—learning how to live on a planet where the human population is growing at exponential rates while the natural resources needed to sustain life are shrinking—was simply not foreseen by religious founders. Nevertheless, the challenges remain.

B. Environmental Mandates from Religious Institutions

Every major world religion, and the various Christian denominations, have taken positions, issued declarations, and made resolutions in support of protecting the environment and the natural world. There is common agreement that the integrity of the planet is severely compromised and that people of faith have a responsibility to work for its wellbeing. Here are examples of these statements:

Peace and the survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human activities which lack a commitment to humanitarian values. Destruction of nature and nature resources results from ignorance, greed and lack of respect for the earth's living things....Many of the earth's habitats, animals, plants, insects, and even microorganisms that we know of as rare or endangered, may not be known at all by future generations. We have the capacity, and the responsibility. We must act before it is too late. ~ His Holiness the Dali Lama

Respect for creation is of immense consequence, not least because “creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God’s works,” and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind. Man’s inhumanity to man has given rise to numerous threats to peace and to authentic and integral human development – wars, international and regional conflicts, acts of terrorism, and violations of human rights. Yet no less troubling are the threats arising from the neglect – if not downright misuse – of the earth and the natural goods that God has given us. For this reason, it is imperative that mankind renew and strengthen “that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.

~His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI

Humans must care for creation and take responsibility for our contributions to environmental degradation. It is prudent to address global climate change. Christian moral convictions and our southern Baptist doctrines demand our environmental stewardship. It is time for individuals, churches, communities and governments to act.

~from a Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change

The crisis facing God's earth is clear. We, as stewards, have failed to live into our responsibility to care for creation and have instead abused it in ways that now threaten life around the planet...As a matter of stewardship and justice, Christians must take action now to reduce global warming pollution and stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world whose land, livelihood and lives are threatened by the global climate crisis.

~General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church

If we cannot live in harmony with the earth, we will not live in harmony with one another.

~From A Pastoral Teaching from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church

Such unanimity of teaching is a compelling reason to take these statements seriously, especially those of one’s own faith tradition. For a more comprehensive list of faith-based environmental statements, please visit this website: GreenFaith/religious-teachings.

Part 2: Congregations Can Make a Difference in Earth Stewardship

We cannot live harmlessly. To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such a desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

~Wendell Berry, author and poet

Religious institutions have an opportunity to fill the same three roles in the environmental movement as they have in other movements: To **educate**, **activate**, and **advocate**.

A. Educate

Religions have always performed a teaching function. Whether educating their followers about the teachings and practices of their faith or in organizing and running schools, religious institutions have been at the forefront of education. The power of the pulpit remains strong. Even today when the organized church has lost some of its power to influence the actions of its members, religious leaders are still looked to for intellectual and moral guidance.

Faith communities have an existing structure and a built-in audience for delivering information and inspiration. Besides their weekly services, many offer on-going classes for their members and the general public. They have the facilities and the resources to be at the forefront of educating about climate change, environmental justice, and sustainable practices. Many denominational headquarters provide excellent teaching and preaching materials on this subject.

By framing the issue from the perspective of religious beliefs, clergy and other leaders can be a powerful force in inspiring and educating their followers to see the connection between faith and taking action for the Earth.

B. Activate

To be viable, religious institutions are expected to *practice* what they preach. This means adopting sustainable practices in their operations, buildings, and grounds. Many denominations have green certification processes that provide excellent guides to all the aspects of greening a facility and operations, including energy-saving practices, recycling, responsible purchasing, Earth-friendly landscaping and gardens, non-toxic cleaning, and sustainable building/renovating practices.

Another step a congregation can take is to form a Green Team which plans and implements a variety of initiatives to insure that congregational green efforts keep moving forward. The work of a Green Team, with support from the leadership, can be a very effective means for helping the congregation as a whole and its members take concrete action regarding environmental stewardship.

The goal is that the example set by the congregation and the efforts of the Green Team educate and inspire individuals in the congregation to make changes in their personal lives, workplaces, and in the wider community. The efforts put forth by the congregation are intended to reach far beyond the institution itself.

C. Advocate

In providing moral guidance for their followers, religious institutions at times take active and visible public positions on issues that influence the wider society. They recognize that religious beliefs must be put into practice in the public sphere, and that widespread change needs to occur on systemic as well as personal levels, which involves action in political and social arenas. They understand that protection of the planet requires a concerted effort by individuals, institutions, business, and government.

Religious institutions as a whole and through its members can have tremendous influence in shaping public policy regarding the environment. More and more congregations are educating and encouraging their members to engage in public policy advocacy on behalf of the planet. This includes education on legislative issues and providing opportunities to sign petitions, write letters, visit legislators, join in rallies, and more.

Rev. Dr. Heather Entrekin, former board member of Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition, has this to say about what is involved in advocacy: *“Advocacy may be defined as active support of an idea or cause, especially on behalf of justice for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, or the voiceless. It inevitably involves the uncomfortable challenge of speaking truth to power. It also calls for the ongoing work of teaching, inviting, and urging. Advocacy requires persistence, patience, partnerships, relationships, and the agility to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. This is hard work and often thankless and discouraging. But advocacy has a purpose far beyond one’s personal life, especially as we work for justice for neighbors suffering consequences of environmental waste, abuse, and degradation. In fact, we speak for creation itself.”*

Advocating for systemic change in society is the natural next step when congregation members, acting from a place of conviction and concern, want to do more than engage in personal or collective sustainable actions. They realize that everyone is in this together—sharing the only planet known to sustain life—and, therefore, must work together in caring for it.

The diversity of life that surrounds us is a gift. It is something that was bequeathed to us, and it is something we bequeath back down onto our descendants. ~Dr. E. O. Wilson, biologist, researcher, and author

We should think of our resources not as having been left to us by our parents, but as having been loaned to us by our children. ~Kenyan proverb.

Conclusion

You shall not pollute the land in which you live. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell. ~Numbers 35:33-34

The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the Web of Life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the Web he does to himself. ~Letter from Chief Seattle, 1854

Justice, peace, and the environment are interrelated, overlapping realms of human and religious concern. Whenever people abuse the environment and engage in non-sustainable consumption of Earth's finite resources, we believe they transgress against God, creation, other people, and all of life.

Caring about all people, especially the poor and oppressed, is a key religious value. Many are beginning to realize that caring for the natural world is a vital component in this concern since climate change, pollution, and resource depletion have a disproportionate negative effect on the poor. Concern is also growing for future generations who will inherit and suffer from a severely damaged planet unless action is taken now.

People of faith are called to be committed advocates for environmental justice for all God's people and all of creation. They are called to help create a society and systems that value the natural world and its integrity. This includes getting involved in public policy and political arenas. The objective is to change minds, change behavior, and change policies.

The environmental crisis facing the planet is real. The far-ranging challenges are systemic and personal. Religious faiths have played important roles in making significant social changes in the past and are being called to do so again in the areas of species destruction, global warming, resource depletion, environmental justice, and others. While national religious bodies have taken positions and spoken strongly about the need to care for creation, it is time for local congregations to do more: to move Earthcare from the nice-to-do column to the imperative-to-do category.

We invite you to contact the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition and ask how we can help you get started or support your current efforts.



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Appendix 1

Ways for Green Teams to Promote Advocacy

- Identify opportunities to do Earth Advocacy on local, state, and national issues. Be selective in picking issues and focus on a few where the congregation can become well informed and active. “Lifting up too many issues as matters of advocacy can lead to confusion and burnout,” advises Rev. Peter Sawtell of Eco-Justice Ministries.
- Communicate these issues to members of your congregation and give them concrete ways to speak out and act in a timely manner. Prepare and distribute resource materials, such as fact sheets, talking points, sample emails, email addresses, phone numbers, and links to relevant web sites.
- Take advantage of faith-based advocacy groups that are already organized, such as Interfaith Power & Light, National Council of Churches, and whichever group provides advocacy materials for your denomination or faith group. Groups such as 350.org and the Sierra Club are also helpful regarding advocacy. Piggyback on the work of many groups. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel!
- Organize advocacy projects for your congregation that include sending emails, signing petitions, and writing letters to the editor, legislators, and other public officials.
- Prepare flyers and notices for bulletins and newsletters if permitted.
- Consider an Environmental Bulletin Board for education and advocacy.
- Seek your own creative ways to be a faithful, prophetic, and effective witness and voice on important and timely environmental issues.



Appendix 2

Principles and Tactics for Doing Earth Advocacy in Congregations:

- Get approval from your congregation leadership about how you will approach advocacy and what kinds of advocacy activities are acceptable.
- Point out the benefits of doing advocacy: gives concerned members a way to make a difference; gives them hope that bigger change can happen; shows that your congregation cares about justice/environmental issues; is a way of putting faith into practice
- Show how doing advocacy is a way to positively impact the poor and needy around the world
- Frame it not in political or conservative vs progressive terms, but in religious, moral terms
- Tie advocacy efforts into human health concerns
- Start with less controversial issues that would be of concern to congregation members
- Make participation optional (no judgments or preachiness about the issue)
- Choose issues that are fairly simple, specific, and winnable. State and local issues are probably easier to sell.
- If you can't promote advocacy to the whole congregation, work with specific groups or individuals that are supportive and ready to act
- Most importantly: find out what advocacy actions your denomination supports, which will give legitimacy to your efforts.