

The Episcopal bishops of the Fourth Province greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Source, Guide and Goal of life. We write you to address our joyful, weighty responsibility to take seriously our stewardship of God's creation. In this letter we will speak to the theology of earth stewardship, the imminent earth crisis that demands our attention as stewards of the earth, and a specific call to engage in environmental education in our dioceses and parishes.

There is deep-seated theology of earth stewardship that we locate primarily in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. The theme of care for the creation is taken up in other parts of the Torah. For instance, in the 25th chapter of Leviticus God enjoins the Hebrew people to "give the earth its Sabbaths". This teaching is in the context of a cluster of teachings about the proper regard of the stranger, the poor, and the disenfranchised. In a world so vastly different from that in which Leviticus was first written and received; that is, an agriculturally based society, how can we understand and fulfill the teaching of "giving the earth its Sabbaths"?

In the New Testament we find witness to both God's care for all of creation and an understanding of the deep bonds that tie all of creation together under the one creator God. In Romans 8 we read that "all creation wails together with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God." By this we understand that our fate, our life, is caught up with all the other lives with which we share the creation, and that these other forms of creation look to us as the bearers of the message of salvation.

Not only is all creation bound together in our commonality of coming from the hand of the same Creator, but we are assured that this same God maintains an ongoing relationship of care and sustenance with the creation. As Luke 12:6 says, "Are not sparrows five for twopence? And yet not one of them is overlooked by God."

So, because this theology is both a theme of the Bible, and because we find it proclaimed in central texts of the Bible, accounts of origin and the revelation of the teaching of God, we can affirm the importance of care for the earth as stewards for God. Yet at the same time we find that we must struggle to give content to these teachings in a world that would seem so very strange to the people of biblical times.

In our own day there is recognition that an unprecedented challenge to the health of God's creation is upon us. The reality of this crisis is widely agreed upon in the scientific community, yet we recognize that the Archbishop of Canterbury is right when he says the "threats [to global health] are just

sufficiently over the horizon of our lifetimes to allow us to feel rational in refusing to change.”

The Church finds itself more and more the bearer of witness to a transcendent reality which impels our vision to encompass more than the daily satisfaction of our wants and desires, and invites us to strive to participate in the purposes of God, which extend to the generations to come. We perceive the threat which lies beyond the horizon of our lifetimes, and must prophetically bring God’s message of stewardship of the creation to bear in our own time. Such prophetic witness will call upon all our resources of reason, will, and compassion.

The dioceses of the Episcopal Church in the Fourth Province encompass land of surpassing beauty, which supports rich diversity of plant and animal life. Some of these places of beauty are so well-known and well-loved as to be iconic: the Barrier Islands of North Carolina; the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee, the Gulf Shores of Alabama and Florida, the Florida Keys, the Mississippi Delta, and the bayous of Louisiana, to name only a few.

Others places are less well known, but are unique and precious. The Black Belt prairie land of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia may stand as an example of this. One source states that this land has been entirely converted to agriculture and other human uses. While not entirely true, the pockets of this beautiful, historic ecosystem are very small and fragile.

This same land and water within the Fourth Province is the basis for important economic activities that support human life. How are we to balance the needs of the current generation for economic security with the needs of generations to come? And how are economic needs to be balanced with the spiritual value we attach to the integrity of creation? We also recognize that where there are pockets of economic poverty we are likely to find the worst environmental depravations, as these areas have been least able to protect themselves from these incursions. We also recognize that political entities that come within our province teeter on the edge of difficult conflict over finite, precious resources, the chief being water. Intelligently seeking to participate in the balancing of these environmental, economic, and social concerns will demand our best efforts.

It is within our Anglican way of being that we should be engaged in such baffling concerns, rather than give in to the temptation to stay at some remove from the fray. We call upon our people to devote energy in studying and understanding the admittedly complex issues connected to the stewardship of the earth. We support your ministry of stewardship that may flow from such educational efforts. Let us bear in mind that as we seek to protect and steward the environment that we not forget to work for the welfare of the human family.

We believe the dual commitments, to humanity and the entire creation, will be found to be essentially in harmony.

Perhaps the most powerful involvement in earth stewardship we can have is in the education of our children. We urge the dioceses and parishes of the Fourth Province to make use of materials in Christian formation that help our children, youth, and young adults find meaning as stewards of God's creation. We further urge the recognition and use of the Fourth Province coordinator for environmental concerns as a resource for identifying curricular materials, and educational programs for use by dioceses and parishes. Attached to this letter you will find useful contact information on resources for environmental education in the Fourth Province.

We might call our efforts in teaching care for the creation "giving the creation a face". In Psalm 27 we read, "'Come,' my heart has said, 'seek his face.' I will seek thy face, O LORD..." By this we might understand the psalmist to be saying that knowing the face of God means growing into a loving, intimate relationship with the Divine, rather than worshipping a impersonal deity who remains distant untouched and unconcerned about that which was created. To give a face to the creation itself means something similar. It means helping our people learn to know and love all that God has created, in its great diversity and wonder. May we embrace our stewardship of God's creation with joy and energy.