

Speaking Notes for the Moderator of the 136th General Assembly (2010),
The Presbyterian Church in Canada,
The Rev. Dr. Herbert F. Gale, at the ecumenical forum
“Environment and Climate in Peril: How People of Faith will Care and Advocate for Creation”
Trinity College, University of Toronto
Wednesday, May 11, 2011

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this forum and to represent The Presbyterian Church in Canada at this table. I've appreciated the opportunity to look more closely at the issue of climate change and what we can do as faith communities to respond to the issue.

Background on The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The Presbyterian Church in Canada traces its roots back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, specifically the reforms in Geneva, Switzerland, under the leadership of John Calvin. The reform movement began in Geneva then spread to Scotland (John Knox) and subsequently to Canada and around the world.

Calvin wasn't seeking simply to “save souls” or just to reform the church, but to **transform society as a whole**. John Knox, when he resided in Geneva as a refugee from religious persecution in Scotland, said that he had never witnessed a more Christian society than Geneva was under the leadership of John Calvin. Presbyterians have always sought through God's grace to be a transforming leaven in society

As moderator, I moderate or chair the proceedings of the General Assembly in which I was elected. Our General Assemblies meet annually. As the moderator of the 136th General Assembly, I am the only commissioner of that Assembly that remains a commissioner after the Assembly is disbanded. As moderator, I represent the church at ecumenical gatherings such as this forum, and I serve as an *ex officio* member of all committees and boards of national church during my year of service. But it is important to remember that I have no more authority than any other presbyter. I speak in an official capacity only as the church itself has spoken and only as the General Assembly authorizes me to speak.

In the area of ecology and the issue of climate change, the church has said a lot -- powerful words that call the church and humanity as a whole to remember our calling as stewards of God's good earth. Listen to just some of the words The Presbyterian Church in Canada has spoken over the past several decades.

The Church Speaks

- Global warming represents one of the most serious global environmental challenges to the health, security and stability of human life and natural ecosystems.
- Governments and farm organizations should promote and encourage the preservation of plant and animal species to preserve genetic diversity.
- Natural resources should be recognized as “capital” to be sustained for future generations.
- The full environmental cost of doing business should be incorporated into the pricing system in both the public and private sector.
- Government financial incentives to resource and manufacturing industries should not encourage over-consumption.

- A nation's decision to encourage environmentally-friendly trade should not be treated, under international trade agreements, as a barrier to trade.
- Any denial of access to water represents lack of respect for God's creation and lack of concern for our neighbour.
- The earth, and all that is in it, is a gift from God, and to survive, human beings are called to honour God as Creator. Human life relies on the stability of the ecosystem for survival.
- Global climate is a public good. This confers stewardship responsibilities upon all of humanity, especially those who live in countries that produce a disproportionate share of greenhouse gases. The ethics of climate change adaptation imply strong support from wealthy countries to countries that are least able to adapt to climate change, particularly in the Global South.

Presbyterians are known as People of the Word – meaning the Word of God in Scripture and the Living Word of God in Jesus Christ. We are also people of “many words” with a greater fondness for speaking than putting our words into action. But as powerful as our words are, the real challenge for us as Presbyterians – and indeed for us as global citizens – is to translate our words into actions.

Summary of Recommendations and Actions of General Assemblies (since 1972)

As a church, we have wrestled with ecological issues from the 1970s and with the issues of global warming and climate change since 1990. A lot of what we have said has been in response to:

- statements and agreements of major world gatherings (e.g. Kyoto and Copenhagen);
- conversations and joint statements with our ecumenical partners (KAIROS, CCC, WARC – WCRC) in ecumenical gatherings;
- or an overture from a presbytery or session or specific motion on floor of Assembly.

In the statements adopted at various General Assemblies we have called the church to study *and* action and instructed moderators to write our government representatives to voice our concerns and hold them accountable.

1972: The 98th GA commended the Club of Rome's study, *The Limits of Growth*, to the church for study and action and to make educational information on ecology and environment available to synods, presbyteries and congregations.

1973: The 99th GA (1973) adopted “**A Theology of Ecology**” and urged local congregations to initiate “ecological chapters” in their communities for study and action, recommended family planning to limit population growth, and urged individual and corporate action to combat pollution.

1984: The 110th GA endorsed the US/Canada Citizens' Agreement on **Acid Rain** and called on the federal and provincial governments to take steps to reduce sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide emissions, the principal cause of acid rain.

1990: The 116th General Assembly adopted a statement on the environment entitled, “**Caretakers or Careless Takers**”, and endorsed the Tokyo Declaration of the World Commission

on Environment and Development. The World Commission on Environment and Development was established by the United Nations in 1983 to propose longer term environmental strategies. This declaration asked nations to integrate sustainable development into their goals.

2001-2002 Mission Study for Adults and Youth was **“God’s People, God’s Planet: Living Lightly on the Earth”** – a six session study looking at humanity’s role in creation, water, land, air, all of God’s creatures sharing this planet with us, and ways that we can live more lightly on the earth.

2008: The PCC became a signatory to the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP).

2009: Groups and courts of the church were invited to hold at least one “100 mile meal” annually and to invite local producers, representatives of farmers’ markets or small businesses to talk about their involvement in the local food economy as a way of exploring environmental stewardship.

2009: There was a motion on floor of 135th General Assembly, that Justice Ministries report back to the next General Assembly the cost of holding a carbon neutral green General Assembly. After considerable debate, this motion was adopted by a narrow margin (92-86).

2010: At the 136th General Assembly, the response from Justice Ministries included a recommendation that commissioners and resource people attending assembly fill out forms at 137th General Assembly indicating their air and automobile mileage to generate baseline data for measuring the carbon footprint for holding the assembly. We will use this data to assist the church in developing policies and strategies to reduce the GA’s carbon footprint going forward. We will also be asking the universities where we are considering holding future assemblies what they are doing to reduce greenhouse gases as one of the criteria for choosing venues for General Assemblies.

2010: 136th General Assembly also adopted **“Caring for God’s Creation,”** upon the recommendation from the International Affairs Committee. That report included among other things...

The Proclamation

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it”² (Psalm 24:1)

For God’s people, consideration of the planet’s wellbeing begins with proclamation and praise. The Psalmist sings “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” (Ps. 150:6).

The Covenant Relationship

In the creation account of Genesis 1, every day ends with God casting the divine eye over the day’s work and calling it good, taking delight in its beauty, diversity and wonder (Gen. 1:31). In Genesis 3, God walks in the garden “at the time of the evening breeze” and seeks an encounter with the human beings, male and female, made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26). Though human beings turn from God, God persists in love and mercy and the promise of abundant life for all. The covenant made with Noah is “with all of creation (Gen. 9:8-12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. . . All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos. 2:18ff).”

The Calling

God calls human beings to a special responsibility within creation: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion . . . over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen.1:28).

The words “subdue” and “dominion” in their basic meaning “to conquer” and “to rule,” respectively, have been used to justify the exploitation of nature and the degradation of creation, for the benefit of humans. It is helpful, therefore, to recover their meaning in the broader biblical context of covenant relationship and the nature of God’s rule. The use of “subdue” in Genesis 1 suggests a differential in power between humans and the rest of creation. Unlike other creatures, humans have the capacity to think and choose, and to reflect God’s nature of love, mercy and justice...

“Dominion” indicates royal rule but does not necessarily include coercion or force. A ruler can exercise dominion for good such as to strengthen the weak and heal the sick (Ezek. 34:2-4). In Genesis 1:26, 28 “human dominion, limited to the earth and the animal kingdom, derives from being made in the image of God and is understood as an aspect of God’s blessing.” The blessing is not just for humans but for the whole creation.

Human beings, understanding their creation in God’s image, have too often interpreted God’s power and might as license to rule over the rest of God’s creation, making it subservient to human will. The Bible, though, also portrays God as the source and sustainer of life (Isa. 40:28-29), shepherd (Ezek. 34:15), creator and provider (Ps. 104) and compassionate liberator (Ex. 3:7-8).

The image of God and true humanity is seen in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15-20). In Christ, who humbled himself (Phil. 2:5-11), dominion is expressed not as mastery or subjugation but as self-giving, unconditional love. Created and sustained by this love, humans are “to care for the earth even as the Creator has already begun to care, to protect and enhance the earth as God’s creation.”

...Living Faith states: “Our care for the world must reflect God’s care. We are not owners, but stewards of God’s good earth” (Living Faith 2.4.1). Dominion as stewardship is a “way of being with,” an aspect of covenant relationship that shapes our identity and our actions.

The Lament

The regrettable truth is that human beings have forgotten the covenant relationship by seeking mastery over others and over nature. Science has brought much good but has also given humans the capacity to pollute and destroy. The prophet Isaiah links human lust for power to the suffering of nature as he paints a picture of desolation that is frighteningly current:

“The earth dries up and withers...
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;
For they have broken the everlasting covenant.” (Isa. 24:4-5)

The Need for Repentance

Humans are called to “return to the Lord, that he may have mercy. . . and to our God, for he will

abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7b). The Accra Confession of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches states, “We confess our sin in misusing creation and failing to play our role as stewards and companions of nature.” We have failed to grasp the interrelatedness of all living things and that “human life depends on the created world” (Living Faith 2.4.1).

The Promise and the Hope

The prophet Joel envisions a day of abundance when the soil and the animals of the field can lose their fear and rejoice in God who has done great things (Joel 2:23-24). The Book of Revelation promises “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:10).

What we can do

It is important to emphasize that *Caring for God’s Creation* was not intended as simply a study document, but also as a call to action:

As individuals and families

- Turning down the thermostat in winter and turning it up in summer
- Using re-usable shopping bags
- Using compact fluorescent light bulbs instead of incandescent light bulbs

Some examples of what individual Presbyterians have done:

- Marnoch Thermal Power Inc -- Ian Marnoch, President and CEO, has patented a new technology that can generate energy at lower temperatures than present technologies can from geothermal or other sources. His technology will be used as a pilot project at a St. Marys Cement factory in Ontario. If successful, the new technology will allow energy generation in colder areas of the world and would provide a way for the wasted heat from factories to be recaptured and converted to usable energy.
- A Presbyterian in western Canada has been an active part of KAIROS and an advocate for ecological issues in his community for years. He helped organized bell ringing in his community on December 13, 2009, during the during the United Nations climate change policy negotiations in Copenhagen. On that day church bells around the world rang 350 times to sound the alarm for the environment. The number 350 was chosen because 350 parts per million is considered the maximum amount of CO2 the earth’s atmosphere can tolerate.

As Congregations

- Forming a Green Team in congregations composed of people of all ages to encourage thinking ecologically in all aspects of the church’s life
- Celebrating Earth Day on April 22nd (Ken Stright’s sermon on Good Friday)
- Having a “walk to church” Sunday
- Conducting an energy audit on church buildings and take steps to make them more energy efficient
- Buying locally grown food and have “100 mile meals”

Some examples of what some Presbyterian congregations have done:

- *Caring for Creation* Bible studies (mission committee at St. Andrew’s, Ottawa).
- Zion Church in Charlottetown, PEI, has all of its heat provided through its connection to the city’s “energy-from-waste” plant which generates steam heat for the hospitals and

other buildings in downtown core from the city's waste treatment plant. Begun in 1983, the energy-from-waste plant burns approximately 30,000 tonnes of municipal solid waste per year and supplies 48 million kilograms of steam. This has meant the displacement of approximately 7.7 million litres of oil. The use of municipal waste has enabled their current landfill site to retain its capacity and reduced the landfill requirements.

- St. Paul's Church in Peterborough, ON, through the encouragement and guidance of the community group "Peterborough Green Up: Greening Sacred Spaces" did a major energy audit on their large, 150 year old building. As a result that changed they replace their light bulbs with more energy efficient light bulbs, added insulation to the attic space over their sanctuary, and closed their main front doors from December through April and used only the side doors of their facility. They received the "Greening Sacred Spaces Award" for 2011.
- Crieff Hills, retreat centre for PCC, recently built new retreat suites on the property. The seven unit building was situated to make use of solar energy through large sliding glass doors and also installed a geothermal heating and cooling system.
- This summer Trinity Church, York Mills is using the *ReNew: The Green VBS* curriculum from Augsburg-Fortress Press.
- St. Andrew's, Owen Sound, used a bequest to install solar panels on their church roof.
- Knox, Tiverton, used a \$100,000 gift to replace their antiquated boiler with a state of the art geothermal system which has reduced their energy costs from \$25,000 per year to less than \$7,000.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to conclude on a note of hope, for it is easy to fall into despair in the face of such overwhelming issues as climate change. "What difference can my little bit make?" we wonder. At such times we need to remember that we are not in this alone. This is God's world and God has not given up on God's creation or on us, despite our failures. As our 2010 statement on *Caring for God's Creation* declares: "Though human beings turn from God, God persists in love and mercy and the promise of abundant life for all." Therefore we remain forever hopeful, because we know that God is with us and in and through God's grace new possibilities emerge where we may see only dead ends or "worst case scenarios."

Back in 1997 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches met in General Council in Debrecen, Hungary. It published a far-reaching Declaration which begins with a theological affirmation: "We belong – body and soul, in life and death –not to ourselves but to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." This is followed by a confession of moral failure and complicity in adding to the world's burdens and allows for a movement to claim new life that relies on the promises of God to break the chains of injustice. Finally the statement moves to a litany that links the phrase "we are not alone" with a set of affirmations:

- **We are not alone** - we will be stewards of creation.
- **We are not alone** - no human ideology or agenda holds the secret of history.
- **We are not alone** - we are in solidarity with the poor.
- **We are not alone** - human beings are not commodities.
- **We are not alone** - we are called to build a new community with a simple lifestyle.
- **We are not alone** - we do not despair for God reigns.

- **We are not alone** - with all God's people we welcome and proclaim God's glory.

Therefore, in the assurance that we are not alone, we pledge ourselves as stewards of creation to work for the day when all creation will shout together: AWESOME!