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THE CHURCH IN THE ECO-CRISIS

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My aim in this paper is to consider the role of the Christian Church in the context of what is an increasingly obvious global environmental crisis, and concerning which a great deal has been said in recent years. It is not my intention to elaborate on that crisis, except to note that its scope encompasses not only ecological issues, but also has some significant implications for social justice and for human and other life generally. Part of the problem has been that Christian theology and mission has tended to be anthropocentric, and along with the population at large, to have taken the natural world very much for granted.

Having said that, my essential argument is that the Church has an important role to play in addressing the crisis, and that such a role is based not on a pragmatic response to the situation, but rather that it rises out of the theology of the Church. With community concern about the environment steadily rising, and whether or not the community expects anything of the Christian community, it hardly needs to be said that the Church must do its theology on this issue in a very public place.

The fact that there is a perceived environmental crisis that is exercising scientists, governments, and many other people and groups, including the Christian Church, means that there are few issues more important for public, practical mission theology than this. The interface between faith and science is a case in point, and the potential for a constructive partnership is significant. I believe there is truth in Moltmann’s perception that science and theology are entering a new phase of partnership. As he expressed it, “The sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show science how nature is to be understood as creation” (1985, p.38).

Ecotheology

Theology, and in particular the emerging discipline of ecotheology, is therefore the foundational building block for Christian eco-mission in the 21st century; there are many interwoven themes that cannot be explored here, although some basic questions can at least be raised. For example, what is the place of humankind within creation? What does it mean for humans to be created in the image of God?

At an even more basic level, who is God?

Eco-mission is of course able to rise out of a range of theological positions, even anthropocentric ones, although I would argue that an excessively human focus can be more prone to lead to exploitation than to care. Biocentrism in its various forms on the other hand holds the value and unity of all life, which in itself is good. The problem arises for me when the fundamental unity of life is allowed to become an equality that virtually eliminates difference. At the same time, it may be argued that there is strong theological support for an understanding of creation that is essentially biocentric, but which is also God-centred, or theocentric. My own preferred term of reference is therefore theistic biocentrism.

Thus, between the extremes of deep ecology on one hand and anthropocentrism on the other, it may be possible to identify humans as part of creation, and not above it, yet with a unique part to play in the economy of God. One of the issues for ecotheology has been the confusion of dominion with domination. But when a dominion theology is understood in terms of its serving nature, or as a reflection of the spirit of Christ, care replaces exploitation as the inevitable response.

Connecting Theology and Mission

A theology of Creation calls for a response, usually described as “stewardship”, although there is some debate about the appropriateness of the term. In spite of any reservations about stewardship as the vehicle for creation care, my proposal is for a composite model based on the term “stewardship”, but that incorporates a number of essential factors.

1. It will reflect a dominion theology based on the *imago Dei* and the servant spirit of Christ.
2. It will express ecological stewardship in terms of partnership; that is, with humankind seen as part of creation rather than above it and recognising fully the value of other life for its own sake, yet recognising also a special relationship with God and ecological responsibility under God.
3. It will express “the biblical language of ‘cultivating and caring for’” creation (Edwards 2006, p.25).
4. It will clearly be based on the inclusive covenant of God as expressed to Noah.
5. An understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent will issue in a sacramental element, but without resorting to the extreme of pantheism.
6. It will recognise the validity of ecological care as an extension of holistic pastoral care.

An Eco-mission Theology

A theology of eco-mission builds on the foundation of ecotheology. But the problem at the outset is finding an adequate and agreed definition of mission. David Bosch has said that mission is ultimately undefinable, and that the most we can hope for is “some *approximations*” of what it is all about (1991, p.9). Norman Habel (1998) however has suggested that there have been three phases in the history of Christian mission, and this will be a useful structural tool in the discussion that follows.

Habel’s first mission of the Church represents an approach that is largely confined to evangelism in the sense of what could be called “saving disembodied souls”.

The “second mission” extends the personal “spiritual” focus “to include ... the whole human being as part of a community” (1998, p.32). Alan Walker expressed this well when he called for “a new, saner, larger evangelism” that will “draw together the personal and the social elements of the gospel, seeking at the same time the conversion of men and women and the building of a society fit for people to live in” (1977, p.7).

The third mission of the Church begins with the call to announce the reign of God, and therefore moves beyond the earlier approaches to a wider vision of mission that encompasses the earth itself, in terms of saving, redeeming, and healing.

In 2005 Bevans and Schroeder made the point that “there has not been much reflection on how the preservation of the integrity of creation is linked to the church’s mission”, and added that “there is no question, however, that it is” (2005, p.375). That position may be changing; in any event, in considering an approach to Christian mission in the 21st century, Bosch was prepared to be quite specific: “A missiology of Western culture must include an ecological dimension. The time is long past that we can afford to exclude the environment from our missionary agenda” (1995, p.55). Eco-mission therefore emerges as one of the essential aspects of a holistic mission response in these days.

As a practical expression of such an approach, one of the more significant mission statements of recent times, in my view, has been the Anglican document known as *MISSIO 2000* (Johnson and Clark 2000). This document asserts that while the Church is marked by the sins of humankind, it similarly reflects its solidarity with the suffering of the world, and at that point it is possible to see the emergence of an eco-mission theology. The Anglican Church’s “Five Marks of Mission” have rightly won “wide acceptance” among Anglicans and others around the world.

The first three points suggest a traditional approach to mission, and there is no problem with that. Similarly, the fourth point, “to seek to transform the unjust structures of society”, is important but not new. It is the fifth point, “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”, that makes quite explicit something that was previously implicit, and clearly identifies the basis of a valid eco-mission.

But while the Church does not need to establish structures that will replicate what secular organizations are already doing effectively, there is still a need to enable both Christian action and the projection of a specifically Christian voice within that wider forum. Even if a secular humanist may not be convinced of that need, there are still several reasons why that should be so. I contend that it is important for the Church itself, for the integrity of the gospel it proclaims, and for the environmental contribution it is able to make alongside other people of goodwill, even if some are not people of faith. Christians themselves need to be educated, and to that end some structural organization may be required to facilitate participation.

The development of a cohesive theology of eco-mission is therefore important, and when applied in practical terms in the life of a Church, it will include a number of elements operating at different levels. For example, the existence of environmental policy statements at both an ecumenical level and at a National-State denominational level potentially provides a fundamental direction and a sense of cohesion in this matter. Second, ownership of an ecological mission policy at a congregation or Parish level is also of critical importance.

Third, there are several crucial areas of contextuality which offer both challenge and opportunity. For example, environmental awareness and concern is rising in the community, focussed for example in issues of climate change, global warming, or even the price of fuel. In that context, an ecologically-aware Christian community could make a significant mission impact. But there is another quite different sense in which context is important. The ultimate context in which Christian eco-mission is set is of course global. It is increasingly apparent that the global biosphere knows nothing about national or even continental boundaries. However, there is also a more immediate context in which eco-mission is

exercised and to which it must relate. A locally identified agenda within an overall global framework will provide the best possibility of relevance and effectiveness.

Fourth, the church will need to consider programs of environmental and eco-theological education, conceived and applied at a number of levels. Fifth, an eco-theological awareness will need to extend to the worship life and spirituality of the church. To some extent that has already started to happen. And finally, eco-theological implications for Christian mission must resonate with a personal and corporate lifestyle that is consistent with those principles.

A theology of ecological mission will therefore have its roots in ecotheology, in the biblical mandate for mission rather than in pragmatism. In a primary sense this will be expressed globally, in general principles that will hold firm regardless of any particular circumstances. But a theology of eco-mission will ultimately need to be worked through and expressed in a myriad of different and particular situations by local congregations.

Practical Responses

In practical terms then, where is the Church in the eco-crisis? There will obviously be elements of a valid eco-mission that will be peculiar to the inner life and working of denominations and congregations. But in a very profound sense, the Church in the eco-crisis is in a very public place. It must exercise its mission in the public square, under the gaze of the public at large. Even more, it must begin to perceive an approach of “mission with” rather than simply “mission to” the community at large. I want to illustrate that through a number of examples of what I regard as eco-mission in the public square” drawn from both the United Kingdom and Australia.

First, one of the questions I addressed in my research is whether the Church should engage the political process as part of its eco-mission. What I found is that those who were involved in some form of eco-mission were almost unanimous in their affirmation that it should. One outworking of that, in the context of climate change, would be Operation Noah in Britain, which, as one of its founders stated, set out to operate “more on a leading edge”.

Second, one of the peak groups operating in Britain is the John Ray Initiative, which has its roots in the Evangelical stream of Christianity. It was founded in 1997 by a group of eminent like-minded scientists, including Sir John Houghton, a former head of the IPCC and a committed Baptist, and had the basic aim of bringing together scientific and Christian understandings of the environment, in terms of the promotion of sustainable development and environmental stewardship. According to JRI’s basic brochure, “They saw two needs: to wake up people to the facts, and to show that technology is only part of the solution. The problem, at heart, is religious, a matter of how we choose to live”. Thus, “JRI was founded to promote sound theology and practical theology as the basis for urgent action.” It is clear, however, that while some of JRI’s courses touch a wider range of people, its prime area of influence is at an elite level, extending to the highest levels of industry, and indirectly even to government.

Third, the Climate Institute in Australia is an interesting case. It does not set out to be a specifically Christian organisation, but it certainly includes a strong Christian dimension, as in its leaflet, “The Christian Call to Action on Climate Change”. More

than that, it also reaches out to other Faiths as well, which is certainly positive in an area that impacts on all life.

Fourth, WaterLines rose out of the Uniting Church Earth Ministry in north Sydney, and set out to be a 3-year research and reflection project based on the catchment of the Lane Cove River. The aim was to “research the environmental significance of water in this region in such a way as to inform the way we do theology with reference to the land and our sense of place.” This connection between the landscape and its inhabitants is also a reminder “that we are sustained by the natural environment and are in turn required to care for the earth.” The promoters of WaterLines assert that “The project has national significance as the first of its type in Australia to make connections across geography, religion, communities, and academic discourses.”

Finally, while in many ways eco-mission in Australia is still in its infancy, my research has shown that Churches and congregations around the country are becoming active environmentally. As I suggested earlier, some projects will have a private face, such as in worship, study, and spirituality, and policy decisions. But others will very much be in the public square; for example, the Grafton Diocese of the Anglican Church has published a booklet called “Building a Better Relationship with our World: a Green Guide for People in Parishes”. In addition, they initiated the Riverbank Rainforest Restoration Project on the Clarence River, and that had implications for the indigenous population, in addition to being in publicly-accessible space. A Baptist congregation in Nambour is working on a community garden project in conjunction with the Regional Council. Ten years ago the Northmead Uniting Church began a creek regeneration project, which also involved cooperation with the local Council. This was consciously regarded as an expression of Christian mission, and the work of the Church was publicly acknowledged. St James’ Anglican Church in Toowoomba has photovoltaic cells on the Church roof, and that has been the subject of some prominent exposure in the media.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the emerging theology and practice of eco-mission opens up a most important aspect of the overall mission of the Church, especially in the public square. The fact of an increasingly obvious environmental problem sharpens the focus of that mission, and offers scope for cooperation across some of the normal divisions; but the driving force of eco-mission, I contend, is distinctly theological. Where then is the Church in the eco-crisis? As I see it, by divine calling the Church is in the midst of it, with the potential to make a positive difference. The good news is that eco-mission appears to be starting up all over the country. The challenge is perhaps best expressed by Conradie, who suggested that what is needed is “a fundamental change of heart, a *metanoia*”, and in the call, as those made in the image of God, to care for creation.

Clive W Ayre, October 2008.

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