

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Individuals : Lifestyle Issues

Title: Stewardship of Creation

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THEME ONE - CREATION

The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August 2002 has brought the issue of environmental issues back into the forefront of public consciousness. The Scottish government is making sustainable development a priority, and so, increasingly, are churches, NGO's, local authorities and businesses. Indeed, one of the main outcomes from Johannesburg is that it is not just a matter for governments. Every sector of society and each of us individually bear a responsibility towards others across the globe and to the rest of the created order.

Psalm 24:1 "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" is a splendid ringing affirmation of the relationship between all creation and its creator. It reminds us that we humans do not own this earth. The Genesis account tells us that the world has not arisen by chance, but owes its existence to God, and that "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." Genesis 1:31. The New Testament sees Christ as the divine Word through whom all things were created (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16) and also as the redeemer, not only of men and women, but of the whole cosmos. John 3:16, begins "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." The original Greek word used for 'world' is kosmos, i.e. the whole of creation. God is not remote from creation, but intimately involved with it. God loves, values and sustains creation, in all its variety and complexity. As God's chosen and trusted stewards, we should do likewise.

God has given us dominion over the rest of creation. What 'dominion' means has long been a controversial issue, especially as Genesis 1 and 2 seem to suggest two rather different models of how God intends us to relate to the rest of creation. In the past, the church has been rightly criticised for interpreting dominion as giving an unrestrained sovereignty over the earth, which has been understood as a mandate to exploit the earth without limit. However, the wider biblical picture sets dominion in the context of taking care of and protecting the creation, in the spirit of the Hebrew notion of servant kingship. This is reinforced in Genesis 2:15 where "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it". The Hebrew words translated 'till' and 'keep' also mean 'to serve' and 'to watch or preserve'. We are God's tenants, given responsibility to serve and preserve the land. Our relationship with creation also includes an element of companionship, a sense in which we are interdependent with nature, fellow creatures together on a shared journey.

The story of God's people in the Old Testament makes an explicit link between the fruitfulness of the land, animals and humans and obedience to God's covenant law. The prophets declared that environmental degradation results from human wrongdoing. "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land...Because of this the

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land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and dying.” (Hosea 4:1-3) “How long will our land be dry and the grass in every field be withered? Animals and birds are dying because of the wickedness of our people, people who say God doesn’t see what we are doing.” Jeremiah 12:4. God is concerned about our environmental sins. Today we see their effects in climate change, loss of biodiversity, increasing consumer waste, pollution in our cities and degradation of the land.

We need to recover the sense that God's covenant with humanity includes our care for creation alongside our fight against poverty and injustice. By changing our attitudes and actions we can play a significant role in reducing rather than exacerbating environmental problems. It is also an opportunity to witness in a practical way to the transforming power of Jesus Christ in our lives and communities. As we do God's will in this way, we can look forward in hope to the time when “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” Romans 8:21

Creation care can prove an exciting and satisfying aspect of Christian stewardship as people learn to appreciate the wonders of God's creation and care for it in spiritual and practical ways. It also has a vital global dimension, finding natural links with concerns for poverty and injustice across the world. In most issues of global poverty there is ecological dimension, and vice versa. We can make connections between our actions as individuals and communities and the lives of other communities and species across the globe.

Some of the themes that might be considered are:

- The Bible's teaching about God's creation
- Learning to enjoy and celebrate creation
- Current environmental issues e.g. global warming, pollution and waste
- The effects of our consumption and pollution on poorer nations, future generations and other species
- Practical ways we can care for creation, as individuals and as local and national church
- Ways we can influence local and national government to take stronger action on environmental issues

This theme could be introduced to congregations through a combination of:

- Sunday Worship, where hymns, prayers, readings and sermons would focus on creation/environmental issues during the stewardship season;
- Study Groups, where there would be a reflection on Bible passages, other writings and news items that deal with creation/environmental issues;
- Practical Projects which care for creation, e.g. to encourage recycling, clean up a polluted place in the community, conserve energy and water use in the church or make the church grounds a better environment for local wildlife.

Every part of the congregation (e.g. adult organisations, youth groups, Sunday school, different committees) could be asked to focus on this theme during the stewardship season. Children and young people often already have an interest in environmental issues: this is an opportunity to relate this interest to the wider theme of Christian Stewardship.

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Focussing on stewardship of creation can also bring many side benefits:

- It can renew interest in studying the Bible and revitalise relationships with God
- It can enliven the Church and promote fellowship
- Implementing energy saving measures can save money too
- Links can be fostered with local authorities and community groups
- Trying to live simply and sustainably can reveal what is really important in life
- Realising that creation care is a key missionary activity can strengthen commitment to mission.
- As the Church does something practical to benefit the community, those outside may be challenged

Eco-congregation

There are several sets of materials available to help churches to examine environmental issues and make appropriate practical and spiritual responses. The Church of Scotland has adopted the Eco-congregation Programme as its preferred resource. This programme is free and helps you to conduct a basic environmental 'check up' of your church, and then focus on different aspects of environmental stewardship. The material include ideas and resources for:

- Worship and preaching
- Children's work and youth work
- Bible study groups and personal study
- Caring for church premises and grounds
- Management of financial, catering and purchasing matters
- Greening personal lifestyles
- Working with, through and for the local community
- Thinking globally and acting locally

The Eco-congregation Award scheme is designed to recognise and affirm the environmental work that Churches do. It is awarded to churches that can show that they have made the link between environmental issues and the Christian faith, undertaken some practical initiatives and worked with or had a positive impact on their local community. Gaining an award can be a powerful witness to others in the community.

Other organisations also provide useful resources.

A Rocha is an international Christian conservation organisation that works to show God's love for all creation. It produces worship material annually for Conservation Sunday, the first Sunday in June, although the resource pack is flexible enough to be used on any convenient Sunday. The website, www.arocha.org, has information on A Rocha's work and also helpful material on the Christian basis for caring for creation.

Christian Ecology Link is a UK organisation that offers insights into ecology and the environment to Christians and offers Christian insights to the Green movement. It produces useful resources including leaflets on environmental issues and a prayer guide focussing on creation care. The website, www.christian-ecology.org.uk, is very informative and they have a 12 minute video "How Green is Your Church" available on loan.

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The John Ray Initiative promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. They also produce briefing papers on environmental issues and can be found on the web at www.jri.org.uk

ECEN, the European Christian Environmental Network, links environmental initiatives across different denominations and countries of Europe. It produces regular liturgical materials, practical environmental information and policy briefings on its website, www.ecen.org

For further advice about tackling the creation theme, please contact:

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